

Is My Plant Good Enough for AOS Judging?

By Deb Bodei

THE QUESTION IS more common than one might imagine among orchid hobbyists. A potential exhibitor considers whether to bring a plant to an AOS judging or not, wondering if the flowering orchid measures up. It is not always easy to size up one's own plant and decide if it is within reasonable range of an award. Then to step into a room full of judges for the first time exhibiting without an idea of the process or what the judges might look for? That can be downright intimidating. In this article, I hope to remove that mystery for exhibitors and at the same time, highlight the role judges serve as we share information with exhibitors.

THE SECRET CODE [Hint: There is no secret code!] The first thing exhibitors should know is that no judges are judging their *decision* to bring a plant. All plants brought to a judging deserve a fair assessment and commentary from the judges even if their plant is not selected for an award that day. Judges love to share their knowledge about orchids with exhibitors and welcome the first-time (or novice) exhibitors with great fervor.

Education is the cornerstone of the judging program. It really does not matter if the candidate plant receives an award or not. In fact, all exhibitors should know that, on average, many of the plants at a given judging will be determined to be nonawardable for that flowering. Think for a moment. If most plants brought to a judging table left with an award, it would not be an incredibly special award, would it? Now that does not mean all the plants presented on a given day will never be awardable, it just means they did not measure up on that particular flowering.

In fact, if a judge comments that your plant has exciting potential it means they really do want to see it at the judging table on the next bloom. Sometimes one blooming may not exhibit its best due to environmental or cultural reasons, or it may simply not be a mature enough plant. A simple culture change for certain types of plants may make the difference. For example, something as simple as giving a little less light or a slightly lower temperature could lead to a bloom with deeper, darker color that shows the bloom's best side!

IDENTIFYING AN AOS JUDGING NEAR YOU The American Orchid Society (aos.org) includes a listing of all judging locations within the US, Puerto Rico and Canada. The Event Calendar (under the News and Events menu) makes it easy to look for both monthly judgments and shows by date.

If there are AOS judges participating in local society meetings and providing commentary for the plant show table, it often comes with a recommendation or encouragement for certain plants to be submitted at the next monthly judging. Judges will even offer to transport candidate plants they have recommended to the monthly judging if the exhibitor cannot make it. Of course, it is always better to bring your plant and attend the judging in person, since there is so much to learn. Exhibitors become better growers and more discerning buyers by attending orchid judgments on a regular basis. Many begin participating by offering to help clerk and some of those go on to apply to the program and become judges themselves!

Societies that host an Outreach Judging event through their local judging center are sometimes surprised by the amount of education that goes along with this kind of event. The judge leading the outreach will provide instructions prior to the actual judging of plants and talk about what judges look for in the candidate plants (see the webinar “What Judges Look For” on the AOS website). This often includes explanation of how a judging is conducted and provides anyone who may not have attended a judging before an idea of what will occur. The short education presentation is typically followed by the plant show table commentary, when judges will identify plants to be judged, select them from the table and begin the process of entering them as candidates before judging assessment and research begins.

RESEARCHING YOUR PLANT There are a few cursory checks that can help a plant owner with their decision to bring a plant for judging. These can help to determine if the plant is blooming better compared to other plants of the species or grex.

- It is important to confirm that the plant label is correct and to know the parents of the cross if it is a grex. It is also important to know the clonal name (the name in apostrophes, which cannot be altered) if the plant already has one, along with any prior AOS awards. This is essential information that needs to be filled out on the entry form.
- For species: Check for valid species on the free Kew World Checklist for Selected Plant Families (<https://wcsp.science.kew.org>).
- For hybrids: Find out if the grex is registered by searching the Royal Horticultural Society’s website (<https://apps.rhs.org.uk/horticulturaldatabase/orchidregister/orchidregister.asp>). The RHS registry is available online free and will give you the plant’s parentage.

In addition, an exclusive benefit for AOS members is access to the AOS awards database, OrchidPro. Check here for up-to-date information to help you assess your plant. There are tutorials available right on the home page of AOS (<https://op.aos.org/>) that show you how to search for your orchid. You can search for plants based on species or hybrid in a basic search, which helps narrow the results down for review.

Compare your plant with similar plants that have received awards. Read the descriptions in addition to looking at the photos. A description is meant to paint a picture in the reader’s mind of a plant even if the photo was not present. Look at the measurements of the plant and find a ruler to check out the natural spread and the petal width of your plant. See the AOS webinar on [aos.org](https://op.aos.org/) called “Measuring for AOS Awards” and you will see exactly how judges assess for these ten points when judging a plant. Ask yourself what makes my plant special and what will the judges notice . . . the great form of the full flowers? The intense color of the lip? Something *should* inevitably “jump out” at you.

Note that many hybrids do not receive awards unless they are seen as improvements on the parents or previous awards. If the cross being investigated has never been awarded before, it is sometimes helpful to do a general search on the genus to see what traits the latest awards have been for and get an idea of the form, color and number of flowers per stem that should be expected for plants with similar parentage.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS If a species has never received an award, that can be exciting too. Be sure to search Kew to make sure the species indicated on the label is indeed a recognized species. In that case, your plant could receive an award that will also allow it to be the first benchmark award ever for that type of species. It will receive a special inspection by members of the AOS Species Identification Task Force (SITF) to verify it is the species named. Exhibitors find it exciting to be part of this process and search for botanical plants to exhibit for this purpose.

If the label only lists the parents and you are unable to find a grex name for those parents in the RHS Orchid Registry, then you may have an unnamed grex, which might give you the chance to name the cross! It is proper etiquette to check with the hybridizer to give them the opportunity to register the cross. Some may choose to name the plant after the first person who bloomed it. Others may have a cross name but just may not have gotten around to registering it yet or may be in the process of registering it. As the exhibitor of the orchid, you would still get to give the plant a clonal name, which will identify the characteristics of your plant as special.

PREPARING FOR JUDGING DAY Finally, make sure your plant is presenting itself in its best light by preparing it in advance. Along with impeccable culture, your plant should be groomed, inspected for critters and staked so the blooms can be seen, are not crowded and face the judges. There is no rule that says the plant must be brought in a fancy pot or holder other than it might be a convenient way to carry it. The judges will only be judging the plant itself. Plants will be judged for their individual flowers. They will also be reviewed for their culture, which could garner the grower an award for excellent growing technique. Look for the AOS webinar on aos.org called “The Process of Judging” by Jean Allen-Ikeson for more details regarding what specific characteristics judges are looking for in plants for them to issue one of several types of awards. Scoresheets are available along with all judging forms in the Awards and Judging section of the AOS website to see which characteristics are judged and how the points are weighted for all the award types.

If you are an exhibitor reading this article and your interest has been piqued, come to a judging! Better yet, contact your judging centers’ chair ahead of time to let them know you will be attending. There is sure to be a welcome when you arrive along with a little help to learn the ropes if it is your first judging. All AOS members and nonmembers should take advantage of this wonderful benefit of judging that the AOS brings to us.

See you all there!

— *Deb Bodei is an associate judge at the New Jersey location of the Northeast Judging Center. She and her husband Bill, who is also an active volunteer and Trustee for the AOS, now have three hobbyist greenhouses in their backyard housing cool, intermediate, and warm growing orchids consisting of a broad variety of genera. They have a dog named Vanda (email: dbodei@aos.org).*