



Cymbidium Albryant 'Superstar' (plant G. Giles, photo D. Banks)

Why Awards?

by Gordon Giles

While going through some old files, I came across the following letter, a copy of which I forwarded to all Judges on

the Sydney branch of the OSNSW Judging panel on the day indicated, some 23 years ago.

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Dear fellow Judge,

I am forwarding a copy of this letter to each judge and the registrar of our panel.

I make no reference to, or criticism of, our show judging. It is to Award judging I would direct my attention.

The question I ask is, "why do we give awards, and do we know what we are about"?

It is not to recognise the hybridiser, a major reason of the English system, as we give scant notice to parentage or comparison with plants from the same, or similar, breeding. It is certainly not to set a true commercial value, as this would require an interest in the plant's performance with the hobby grower. We then would certainly not award Cattleyas that have been disbudded, and other flowers that we know have been manipulated. If we are more than 50% sure of manipulation, then let us say so, and give no award.

We do not judge to set a standard. We say a white *Phalaenopsis* is too easy (they aren't really), so no award. However, we say a primary hybrid *Paphiopedilum* (say) is interesting, and we award it. Why?

I believe the reason for awards is lost in history.

We allocate to colour and shape, "aesthetic qualities" the great sum of 3 points to separate nothings from First Class Certificates

(FCC). I don't believe that anyone is so clever that they can divide an aesthetic value to 1.5 points; yet that is what we pretend to do. We see in the case of *Paphiopedilum* Songbird 'Pathfinder' AM/AOC-NSW (Award of Merit), perhaps one of the finest Paphs of its type; a whole 0.4 of a point saved from the indignity of a Highly Commended Certificate (HCC). I believe HCC is like a ribbon given to a young child at a pony club meeting – for attending. I also believe we hide our uncertainties behind this HCC thing.

Is it possible that Award judging is now redundant? This business of awards seems to be the exclusive prerogative of Orchid Societies. If awards are still a viable institution then we must look very closely at what we are doing.

I would like to see much more discussion at award judgments. This is normal practice in most overseas judging panels. I feel we could, after discussion, cast a vote by secret ballot for the award we desired. The points could be allocated later. (Points are an Australian Orchid Council requirement). Most points, for size, number of flowers, even substance, stem and habit are fairly arbitrary. Shape and colour is what is really in question.

I write this, not in criticism, but with the idea of clarifying our thoughts and us all working in harmony.

I have been around the traps for a lot of years and have seen a lot of flowers in a number of countries. I feel I am of average intelligence. If I am unsure of our direction, it seems possible others may have the same doubts.

Finally, I feel we should restrict all discussion of these matters to our fellow judges.



Cymbidium Death Wish 'Dreamtime' (photo G. Jackson)

There are a couple of things that should be noted about the above, that may not ring a bell with present day judges and enthusiasts. There was a fad at the time, of dis-budding cattleyas. A needle was passed through the sheath while the buds were still quite small. This had the result of aborting the treated buds, but the raceme healed over so there was no visible sign of what had happened. Some people still insist that this did not happen. Unfortunately it did.

Perfect white *Phalaenopsis* are still hard to come by. Quality plants are still being under-awarded, I believe, because there is no clear defined reason for awards, and even if there was, there are no references in a visual form of what has gone before. A perfect example would be *Paphiopedilum* Songbird 'Pathfinder' possibly still the best of that colour even to this day. How many judges have seen it and ones that have, do they have that good a memory?

In *Cymbidiums* we had *C. Albryant* 'Superstar', the finest pure colour yellow that has been exhibited, indeed one judge said to me that if the labellum was just a little larger it would be perfect. It got an HCC. Recently *C. Khanebono* 'Jacinta', an excellent intermediate, was only awarded an HCC. Indeed its parent *C. Akebono* 'Dural' met a similar fate (also an HCC) many years ago, and yet it is still winning prizes today. So if these plants that win prizes on a regular basis are graded so lowly, there must either be some remarkable plants that the judges have seen, or there is something wrong with the system. Indeed, a meagre 10.01 points can be the difference between a "no award" and an FCC!

I mentioned in the above letter, that all discussion on the matter should be restricted to judges. After 23 years and with no answers from judges or registrars, I think these matters can and should be thrown open for discussion. One of the problems facing new judges is the lack of orchid nurseries. Indeed there is now none operating in the greater Sydney basin, so

where it was once possible to browse and compare, and talk on a regular basis, now learning is confined to monthly meetings and shows. This obviously restricts the number of plants that a judge is exposed to.

A decision was made by the Sydney panel for a booklet to be published with examples of award flowers, reproduced to the exact size and colour.

Finance was available, but after 4 years nothing at all had happened, and the project lapsed. This was a pity, as it would have been a good reference for everyone, judges and growers alike. Maybe I will revisit this myself, as I still feel there is an obvious need for such a training document.

There is a tendency today, for plants that are away from what I will call the commercial genera, to be submitted for awards. I quick glance through recent awards – Australia wide – will show a high majority of quality awards given to species orchids or primary or novelty hybrids. As already indicated the commercial genera do not do too well so are not regularly presented. Now there is no problem with this if there is sufficient discipline applied. Too often little is known of the parents, so it is hard to tell if there is any improvement that could be considered worthwhile. Where species are involved, no matter what the award is called, it is really only a cultural

certificate – as many of the judges would be unfamiliar with what they are really looking at anyway. It has been suggested by *cymbidium* growers that you can cross anything, and if something unusual turns up then it is worthy of recognition.

I have no problem with breeding away from recognised standards. Indeed the work being done with the novelty *Cymbidium* Death Wish is excellent. They have definite ideas that they are following, wanting to preserve the desirable characteristics of the grand parent *Cymbidium tracyanum*, such as the curvy petals and the perfume, and striving to improve the colour of the labellum and the flower whilst reducing the size of the plant and foliage. They know where they want to go, but how success should be recognised is another matter.

One of the problems with, I will use the term "unusual" clones, is that too often the grower asks a judge should it be submitted. If the judge says yes, they have placed an opinion on the plant that judges, new to this type of flower can be influenced one way or the other. Quite often the person submitting the plant is a judge. Here ethics come in. If I can quote from the American Orchid Society; "Bias". It is impossible for anyone to be totally objective. For example if one judges a plant belonging to a close friend, they are predisposed to judge the plant favourably, because they like the owner, or unfavourably if they don't like the owner. Even if the plant is judged fairly, people may feel that the judge cannot be fair because of the relationship. This gives rise to an appearance of impropriety,

Cymbidium Flaming Vulcan 'Dural' (plant G. Giles, photo D. Banks)



Cymbidium Khanebono 'Jacinta'
(plant G. Serhan, photo D. Banks)

which should be avoided. It is also possible that when judging a friend's plant, to judge by more severe standards, so not to show bias. The recommendation is "when in doubt, opt out".

I was once on a judging panel at a show in the USA when the leader of the panel was not only judging his own plants, but was doing his best to influence the panel to award his plants. I left the panel but could see why the American Orchid Society pushed their policy of ethical judging.

As you can see from all the above that no one has as yet answered the question: "why do we give awards", and all the imponderables that are thrown into the equation, the whole question of awards needs to be opened to sensible discussion, and either brought to a timely end or put on a basis that is fair and equitable, and can be understood and explained to the ordinary hobbyist grower. Maybe it can be discussed and debated within the pages of the *AOR*?

So why do we give awards? One thing is certain, the answer is not : Because we can! ■

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