

JUDGING ORCHIDS AT THE ROYAL HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY

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Of all the judging groups from around the world who are qualified to give internationally recognized awards, the Royal Horticultural Society's Orchid Committee is different in many ways. It is the oldest system in existence and is operated by a horticultural society rather than an orchid society. Other systems start as a committee giving awards whose members are chosen from orchid societies. These societies have grown up over the years as a direct result of the public interest that has arisen from orchid growing. In the RHS there is a totally different system, which was born out of orchid interest among the members of a general horticultural society. It is, therefore, important to see how the society itself started before we examine how the judging system works.

In 1804, a group of enthusiastic gardeners in London formed the Horticultural Society and within a few years it had become the Royal Horticultural Society. The group continues to hold that title and still enjoys royal patronage. In 1804, the objects and aims were to further the interest in gardening and horticulture. Orchid growing at that time was very much in its infancy as very few plants had been collected. With the increase of trade abroad and the expansion of the British Empire, more and more tropical plants found their way to the United Kingdom. As a result, gardeners began to build greenhouses and experiment with the heating of them. Finally, they achieved a structure in which they could reproduce almost any climate in the world. Thus began the great orchid-growing fever.

With this general interest in plants, the Royal Horticultural Society decided to give a First Class Certificate to any orchid they thought worthy. The FCC/RHS was given to plants "of great excellence" and was first introduced in 1859. A Certificate of Cultural Commendation (CCC/RHS) did not make its appearance until 1888. It is awarded to orchids which are considered to be "meritorious." The Certificate of Preliminary Commendation (PC/RHS) was first instituted in 1931, to be given to "a new plant of promise."

The RHS is run by a council which is elected yearly at the annual general meeting held in February. The council issues invitations to sit on their various committees, which specialise in the different forms of horticulture. These numerous committees include experts on fruit and vegetables, roses, narcissuses and tulips, rock gardens as well as scientific subjects. There are also general committees such as Floral "A" and Floral "B." Together, these committees cover the whole of the plant kingdom.

The Orchid Committee commenced in 1889 and took over the task of giving awards to orchids from the general council. Even today, neither the orchid nor any other RHS committee actually gives awards to plants. They only recommend their awards to the council and the council must confirm these awards before they are made public. The Orchid Committee meets 14 times a year in the Orchid Room at the Royal Horticultural Society's headquarters in the New Hall, Greycoat Street, London, apart from one meeting which is held at the Chelsea Flower Show, a few miles away. The Orchid Room houses the files and records of awards dating back to the first meetings.

The present Orchid Committee consists of 25 members, including the chairman and vice chairmen, who collectively represent a wide range of interests including commercial growers, leading amateurs, botanists and taxonomists. Personal invitations are based on the individual member's knowledge of orchids and what he or she can contribute to the committee. Unlike other judging panels around the world, there are no trainee judges nor is any form of examination required to become a judge. Members are re-invited annually to continue in service.

One does not have to be a member of the Royal Horticultural Society to submit a plant for an award. But people exhibiting within easy reach of Greycoat Street are expected to show the whole plant in bloom. However, where this is difficult for potential exhibitors from abroad, they are welcome to show cut flower spikes. Plants or flower spikes must be received by the secretary of the Orchid Committee before 10:30 am on the morning of the meeting. This allows an hour before the committee sits for the records of any previous awards to be checked



and hybrids to be registered. This also allows time for the members to examine the plants in detail. The number of plants submitted at a meeting may vary from five to six to as many as 30-40 at a time. This depends on the time of year and which orchids are in season. When the committee sits at 11:30 am, each plant is examined separately, its name and parentage readout together with the details of any previous awards. Having allowed time for the plant to be examined, the chairman will ask for comments and criticisms. This will be followed by a call for a proposal. If an award is proposed and seconded, then a show of hands completes the judging. There must be two to one in favor of the proposal for the plant to receive an award. This allows an hour before the committee sits for the records of any previous awards to be checked and hybrids to be registered; it also allows time for the members to examine the plants in detail.

This simple but effective method of judging has been used for nearly 100 years and is known as the appreciation method. The committee is occasionally criticized for not using a point system but it is their opinion that they would certainly end up with the same result whichever system was used. The three main awards, PC/RHS, AM/RHS and FCC/RHS are given to plants which the committee considers are different enough from anything they have previously seen and are worthy of the certificate. This appreciation method is based on the personal knowledge and experience of those handling particular plants. If a member feels that his or her knowledge is insufficient about something unusual or beyond their scope, it is quite in order to abstain from voting on that occasion. Should any member have a vested interest in a plant, they must abstain from voting or declare their interest and leave the room while the plant is being judged.

The chairman will read out from the application form the full details of the plant, the originator of the cross if it is a hybrid, who has made the present cross and the exhibitor of the actual plant. All this information is available to the committee before they make their judgment. At one time, the size and shape of a flower were much more important than they are today. For instance, in the past, more emphasis was put on roundness. Originally, the committee was judging mostly species. Therefore, the feeling was that every form of hybridization should show an improvement in size and shape of bloom, thus aiming at the ultimate goal, a perfectly round if shapeless flower.

Today, with the tremendous amount of intergeneric hybrids seen from home and abroad, the interest has changed back to flowers with more character, unusual shapes and colour forms. By using the appreciation method of judging, the committee can be flexible and move with the times. When the committee was first formed, size and shape were the all important features. Today, the committee is more progressive, giving encouragement to new lines of breeding, recognizing that character and colour, pattern of flowers and habit of spike can be more important than the shape of the individual bloom. It is still possible for outstanding species to receive awards, even an FCC/RHS, right along with the latest and most modern of hybrids.

Although the RHS does not publish the details of its awards in its own magazine, *The Orchid Review* each month carries

colour photographs and full particulars of the orchids exhibited, including measurements, quantity of flowers, etc.

When an orchid receives an AM/RHS or an FCC/RHS, it is painted by the official RHS artist. This practice began in 1897 when the committee felt the need to record the awards they were giving and to be able to scrutinize previous award winners so that comparisons could be made. A young lady named Miss Nellie Roberts was invited to paint the awarded orchids for a six-month trial period. She continued to do so for the next 56 years, by which time she had faithfully painted every award given by the RHS. When the committee examines a species that has previously been awarded, members are able to consult the painting of that awarded clone and compare it with the plant before them. This greatly assists the committee in coming to its final decision. In the case of a hybrid, other awards to the grex will be removed from the files for comparison with the new exhibit. The result is that, after many years of painting the awards, the committee has a large visual reference collection on which it can call. These are filed in alphabetical order in the Orchid Room and are available for the committee to use at every meeting. Exhibitors may also have a copy of the painting for their own use and most proud recipients of awards are pleased to do so. Each year, at the British orchid Growers Association's Show held in March, the previous year's paintings are put on display, enabling the public to see for themselves the award winners.

An even larger display of paintings is planned showing the development of orchids from 1897 to 1985 at the International Centenary Orchid Conference incorporating the British Orchid Council's Congress, the 7th European Orchid Conference and the British Orchid Growers Association's Show to be held in London at the RHS March 20-23, 1985. After judging, the awarded plants go on display in the hall when there is a regular RHS flower show.

Apart from the four awards already mentioned for individual plants, the Orchid Committee also judges groups of orchids for which it can recommend one of the RHS's medals. These are bronze running through to gold. In addition to these, there is an annual award called the Westonbirt Medal that is given

for a different branch of orchids each year. Also, the George Moore Medal is presented, on the council's recommendation, to the best The Orchid Committee examines only orchids that are considered too delicate to survive out-of-doors in Britain. Therefore, they do not examine any of the alpine orchids such as pleiones and orchis, which are considered hardy in this country. These are judged by the Alpine Committee. ■

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