

## *Making a Champion*

Isn't it great when a new flower appears in the orchid house and you look at it and think; that's a beaut! It's a winner! But how do you win against the experienced and competition hardened veteran?

Preparation is the answer. Judges are only human and while they are only required to judge the flowers, when the competition is close other factors such as presentation, cleanliness and health of the plant can and will have a subconscious influence on their decision.

As usual I'm jumping ahead. Let's start at the beginning. In the May issue of the Bulletin I used a quote from 'Orchid Wise' written by Roger Rankin, the South Australian Registrar. It read ("*The best way to win an orchid show is to start with the best orchid*"). So how do we achieve this?

- Select the genus you wish to excel in.
- Research and understand its growing requirements. Critical items are water, light, air movement growing medium and nutrient.
- Talk to and visit those growers that consistently produce good results.
- Examine and evaluate your growing environment and make the changes necessary.

Having established a suitable environment to grow your prize winning plants its time to visit the shows and see what is winning in your selected genus. Once again talk to the growers and nurseries to see what is about and what is in the pipe-line. Having completed and evaluated your research purchase your future grand champions.

So now you have a first class plant and it's flowered to its potential in your estimation, what is necessary to prepare it to become a champion?

### **General**

A show is never won on a Thursday morning; it is won in the 12 months leading up to the show by correct preparation. Critical items are water, light, air movement growing medium and nutrient

No matter what the genera, the plant should be free of old flower spikes as well as dead and loose bracts. Where possible remove damaged and unsightly leaves. Leaves can be washed with a mix of 50% water and 50% milk. You will be surprised at how much this improves the appearance of the plant.



Plants must be free of sucking insects such as mealy bug and scale. If stakes are used within the plant other than in association with the flowering rhizomes these should not be unsightly and detract from the overall appearance of the plant. All unnecessary ties should be removed.

If pots are old and battered simply place, them pot and all, into another pot and sprinkle fresh bark over the top.

Flower buds (especially potential champions) are very attractive to insects so the growing area must be kept clean and as free of insects as possible. An extra precaution against crawling bugs is the use of cotton wool tied part way up the flower spike.

Many good blooms are damaged in transit. Before packing your plants into carry boxes stake and tie blooms firmly. Pack carefully so as not to damage flowers. Make sure packing around the pots is sufficient to prevent movement during transportation.

When placing your plants on the bench make sure the judges have a clear view of them. Be careful of other peoples' plants, do not damage them or block the judges' view of them. If you have problems fitting your plants on the bench find a steward and ask for help.

### *Phalaenopsis*

It is important that training of the flower spike commence early in its development to ensure it grows as you want it with out introducing uneven and unwanted bends in the stem. This is done by placing a stake adjacent to the spike and pointing in the direction you wish the spike to take. By placing the stake vertically the plant can be kept more compact than if the stake is at an angle less than 90°.



There are a number of ways to control the arching of the spike. One method is to use a long aluminium stake bent to the shape you wish the spike to assume and progressively tie the spike to it as it elongates. Once the spike has finished growing the stake is cut off prior to the first bud. Another method is to use a relatively short vertical stake and fix a small weight to the top of the spike in such a way as to cause the spike to arch in the desired direction as it develops. This method will produce a more natural curve in the spike. The weight used is quite small and any attempt to hurry the process by using too heavy a weight could end in disaster.

Flower spikes will tend to move to face the light. In order to stop the spike twisting the plant should be aligned with the most significant light source. Where two spikes are growing too close together they can be separated by inserting between them a strip

of polystyrene foam notched at each end.

The arrangement of the flowers on the large standards is a very important factor in the judging of these plants. This has been achieved by the dedicated efforts of hybridisers over a long period of time and it is not possible to make a poorly structured plant take the aspect of a well bred one. It is possible though to correct a minor error if one flower does not finish in quite the right direction or at the right angle. This must be done with great care and patience and even then you may be taking your pride and joy to the show minus a flower. Altering the set of the flower should be attempted only after the daytime temperature has risen and the chill is off the air. To make the flower stem more flexible and less likely to break, stroke the ovary and stem between thumb and forefinger to warm it further. You can then rotate the flower slightly past the position you wish to set it and hold it in that position for a minute or two. This may have to be repeated a number of times. Attempting to make dramatic changes will result in disaster.

### *Cattleya Alliance*

If the plants have a number of new growths emerging it may be necessary to redirect them to balance the flower distribution on the plant, and to prevent the growths interfering with each other. This can be achieved to some degree by placing a label or some other object in such a position as to force the rhizome to take your preferred direction.

As the buds appear it is an advantage to stake the flower stem early to keep the buds upright. When there are multiple buds they may need to be spaced so the flowers are not bunched together when they open. Bunching will not allow the blooms to open properly and display themselves to their full potential. A piece of polystyrene foam or an old label cut to the right size can be used as a wedge to force the flowers apart. It may be necessary to do this in stages if the gap needs to be widened significantly. Once again be aware that this is best to undertaken when the air is warm. There is always a risk that if you are not careful you will break a flower off.



Stakes and ties that are used specifically to train your plants should be removed before they are benched. Only stakes and ties needed for support during the show should remain.

What you see on the show bench is not necessary what comes out of the bud. The judges are looking for round flat flowers. While the practice of flattening or pressing the flowers may be frowned upon, it is routine for many growers, others prefer to do nothing to improve their blooms, working on the theory that the natural way is the best. A common method of meeting the judging criteria is to place a piece of rolled tissue around the column forcing the petals to be pushed back. If the tissue is left there for a few of days the flower sets into this position. This has the effect of flattening the flower but not destroying the natural shape of the individual segments.



Another practice commonly used is to make two round collars from a light material such as sketching paper. One collar is fitted to the front of the flower with the other fitted to the back. Slots in the collars allow them to fit behind the labellum in the front and over the stem at the rear.

They are then clipped together. Paper gliders are suitable. This tends to press the flowers very flat and quite often leaves press marks. All flowers are not the same and take different times to set. Some never do.

It is advisable to remove tissues and collars at least two days before benching as there is always some change of shape in the flower once the restrictions are taken away. Some move very little some a lot. A plant that will not hold its shape for the duration of the show should not be benched.

### *Paphiopedilum*

When you see the first indication that a plant is going to flower, place it in the flowering area of your bush house and do not move it about. This is to allow the flower stem to grow straight rather than twisting to find the new light source. Orchid growers always have the urge to pick up their plants and examine them. To ensure the spike goes back facing the same direction it is a good practice to use the label as a marker. Place it at the front of the pot in line with the spike and the light source.

If the flower has a sturdy stem, it can be allowed to grow without support. If however the stem is on the spindly side, a light stake can be provided. This would be set in the pot at about 15° towards the light and the spike held to it at 2, 3 or more points. It is a good idea to sharpen the point of the stake before pushing it into the media. A single cut with secateurs is sufficient. This will lessen the damaging to the roots of the plant.



One of the problems with *Paphiopedilums* is the bend in the ovary. This may cause the flower to face down further than you might wish. Once the spike has finished growing it is possible to straighten this bend. Place a figure 8 tie very firmly on the base of the ovary, then another tie on the top of the ovary. This second tie can be progressively tightened to remove the bend. There is always a risk of snapping the flower off so this should only be done during the warmer part of the day and with great care.



The other problem area you may wish to correct is in the cupping of the petals. The petals can be pushed back by taking a sheet of soft toilet paper, (unused), folding it in halves and then rolling it up into a cylinder. This is then placed at the base of the petals and held in place by the wing of the pouch being careful not to mark the pouch. Once you have inserted the pads stand back and check that petals are still symmetrical. If one or the other is not in the correct alignment make the adjustment necessary.

Before taking to the plant to a show the spike is re-staked into the vertical position This will lift the flower so that it is displayed for the judges and the public to appreciate its perfection. Ties that



are to remain during judging and throughout the show must all be below the ovary. The wadding holding back the petals should be left in place until the plant is ready to be placed on the bench. This packing

will help prevent damage during transportation

### **Summary**

My reading of the AOC 'Guidelines for Judging Handbook' is that it does not comment one way or another on the manipulation of flowers. It would be very difficult to draw a line as to what should or should not be permitted e.g. is staking manipulating. Also some of the more extreme forms of manipulation are impossible to detect once the corrective device has been removed and the plant benched.

Orchids are beautiful flowers and we should grow and appreciate them in their own right. If winning a competition becomes all consuming then perhaps we will lose the real joy that we should get from growing these wonderful plants. So let's not get too carried away with trying to make these flowers into something that they were never meant to be. Big, round and flat sounds more like a cardboard cut-out than an attractive flower.

While only 3 genera have been considered in this article the points discussed could be applied, with some modification to others.

*Charlie Edwards*