

How are your orchids judged?

With thanks to Samantha Stevens and John Keenan.

Growing your orchids for competition creates a whole new level of complexity.

The Australian Orchid Council judging rules are the guidelines for orchid judges, and are more complicated than discussed here. The NSW Regional Judging Panel provides the judges, who are trained in a rigorous course lasting four years. Three of these years are spent at a status of Associate Judge before becoming a full judge.

Presentation is everything so therefore anything you can do to improve it within the rules is advantageous. Flower spikes should be staked as they develop so as to display the flowers to full advantage. Stakes and attachments should be unobtrusive and cut to an appropriate length. Keep the stakes lower than the flower spike itself. Flower spikes should not be allowed to droop unless they are naturally pendulous in habit. Also the racemes should not be twisted or bent.

Some of the easy things you can do to best present your plant is to clean up the pot and the plant itself. Clear away any weeds, spider webs, dead bulb sheaths and old flower spikes. Also try and avoid damage to plants and flowers during transportation. Invest in a sturdy cardboard or polystyrene box or two and pack around your plants with newspaper, scrunched plastic bags, bubble-wrap, or anything else that you can use as padding. This will prevent plants from moving about or falling over in transit and damaging the flowers. Also ensure that your plant is healthy and well-grown. Remove old and dead bulbs or canes. Ensure the plant is disease free as diseased plants will be disqualified.

Try to position the plant so that flowers all face the same direction as much as possible. Flowers tend to open towards the strongest point of light, so if you move the pots around make sure to put them back in the same orientation so as to avoid twisted flower spikes.

Judging is comparative, rewarding the best flowers in each group or class. With a few exceptions (such as miniature Cymbidiums), the judges will concentrate on the best flower spike the plant has produced. It is possible that a good flower spike on one plant will win over multiple lesser quality spikes on another plant.

Judging is based on a total of 100 points allocated to different criteria. This can vary for certain genera but on the whole they are broken down as follows:

Flower shape = 30 points

Judges look for how a given flower compares to the "ideal" shape desired for that particular genera. This can vary widely so it is important to be aware of the criteria for the genera you are looking to display. As a general rule, petals and sepals that are twisted, distorted, reflexed (curl backwards), or otherwise vary too widely from the ideal will be marked down.

Colour and attractiveness = 30 points

Flower colours should be clear, glistening and fresh. Shading and markings should be well defined and even throughout the flowers as much as possible. Bright, vibrant and unusual colours grab attention and will win higher marks, while muddy or dull flowers will score lower.

Flower size = 10 points

As a general rule, the bigger, the better! However this will vary depending on genera; for example some orchids are classed as miniatures and are expected to have tiny flowers. Often judging classes have pre-defined flower sizes and a measuring ruler will be brought out if there's any dispute.

Substance and texture = 10 points

Flowers should be firm, fresh and lustrous. There should be no marks, insect damage or other blemishes. Judges will also look at whether the flower can maintain its own shape.

Habit and arrangement = 5 points

This refers to the flower spike as a whole, and will depend to a certain extent on the genera of the orchid. Where multiple flowers are present on one spike, they should be evenly distributed along the spike and stand away from one

another. The flowers should stand away from the foliage and ideally all face in the same general direction. The spike itself should be strong enough to support the flowers and judges may remove staking to ensure that this is so.

Floriferousness = 5 points

This refers to the number of flower spikes and the number of flowers present on each. This will differ with the genera of the orchid, but as a general rule, the more, the better! The number of spikes and flowers should match with the maturity and size of the plant. Only fully open flowers are counted and at least two-thirds of the flowers on any flower spike should be open.