Flower Judging to Develop Professionalism among Floriculture Students

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"I chose A over B because it had better overall quality and uniformity. The color of A is particularly nice and the whole group is in very good condition. Both A and B are better than C, which lacks uniformity and appears old."

Does this sound like a commercial where the consumer chooses brand A over brand B? Maybe, but it is also the kind of comment that has been heard in flower judging classes at schools throughout the United States where floriculture is taught.

Selecting and marketing high-quality flower crops (a natural extension of flower judging) are important to everyone in floriculture—growers, wholesalers, retailers, plant breeders, teachers, cooperative extension agents, and even those who desire to be accredited flower show judges. In addition, competitive flower judging is also an important youth development activity among FFA and 4-H groups across the United States.

In flower-judging classes, students concentrate for many weeks on recognizing quality flowers and plants. They review the normal production and postharvest handling techniques for commercial greenhouse crops and learn about the environmental conditions that affect the quality of flowers and plants as they move through marketing channels. As a result of this intensive study, the students begin to realize why flowers and plants from the greenhouse look as they do, and the students can make some estimate about how long the products are likely to last. Ultimately, the elusive term “quality” can be more clearly defined and quantified, and given economic value.

Students develop a discriminating eye in judging and learn to make quick, objective judgments about the plants and flowers they see. To be objective, the students must learn to rank plant qualities, such as color, size, foliage condition, stem strength, and cultural perfection. Each plant quality criterion might have several aspects to consider. Foliage condition, for example, may include foliage color, mechanical damage, insect and disease injury, and even uniformity of size and shape.

Various systems are available to use as guides for judging flower and plant quality. A common system used at The Pennsylvania State Univ. (Penn State), at many other universities, in the FFA, and in 4-H is a system developed over many years by Pi Alpha Xi, the National Floriculture and Ornamental Horticulture Honorary Society. The Pi Alpha Xi system emphasizes quality and economic value, i.e., problems with these features of plants and flowers that tend to reduce appeal and value in the marketplace the most are considered the most serious faults. Standards are available in the Pi Alpha XI system for most of the commercial flower crops grown and it probably provides the best guidelines for anyone involved in commercial floriculture (Pi Alpha Xi, 1987).

Many of the plant societies in the United States have also developed standards for specific crops such as roses, gladiolus, African violets, and chrysanthemums. The standards developed by the plant societies are frequently used when judging amateur shows across the country. Judging students should be introduced to these standards as well when they train. Hamel (1982) provides a particularly good reference containing judging standards from the plant societies for all types of floral design and for flower shows.

Penn State is the home of one of 26 All-America Trial gardens for bedding plants, roses, and vegetables. As part of their training, judging students at Penn State have studied the criteria used to evaluate bedding plants and roses outdoors in the gardens. These unique criteria add considerable dimension to the judging experience, and demonstrate the wide variety of judging systems functioning in floriculture (All-America Selections, 1988; All-America Rose Selections, 1988).

Each system of standards serves a unique purpose and focuses on a specific set of plant qualities, some giving the most weight to factors that reduce salability, others emphasizing factors that produce and encourage cultural perfection. Flower judging students are usually exposed to all of the systems and will develop expertise in using the systems through actual classroom judging experience. It is quite common also for the students to visit wholesale and retail floral operations and actually set up classes to judge—a nice way to cultivate cooperation between education and industry.

Much of what occurs in judging sessions at Penn State and elsewhere is actual judging. Horticultural judgement groups, known as classes, are set up by the instructor or by the students, then the classes are judged and discussed. A class consists of four containers with several stems of one cultivar of cut flower, or four pots of a potted plant cultivar. The four specimens within a class are ranked from best to worst, considering the merits and faults that exist among the entries.

Discussion is an important part of the judging exercise. It is in this discussion that the students become aware of differences of opinion, of compromise, of fine details they may have overlooked. From the discussion, students sharpen their skills at matching plant cultural techniques with the final product's quality. A nice bonus is that the students will develop confidence in speaking before groups, especially in situations when it means stating a potentially controversial opinion.

It is an important part of the training to actually set up judging classes to make the judging objective and fair. To set up a fair contest, students must consider such things as lighting, uniformity in number of flower stems, and type of flower in each entry container size, following the rules, and perhaps setting up classes that emphasize certain faults or plant characteristics. In the process of setting up classes, students become aware of the importance of display, and the elimination of factors that may unfairly influence the judging. They also further develop their skill at recognizing fine details.

Some students taking judging courses have had no others in horticulture. For them, the activity is an introduction to the abundance of flower and plant crops available. They develop a keen appreciation for quality and become better consumers if only choose to take no additional courses. Most students, however, will use judging activities as a kind of summary of their floricultural education. They have already had such courses as greenhouse systems and crop production, business management and marketing, postharvest physiology, plant and flower identification, and flower arrangement. In judging, they can develop the fine professional edge that comes from putting all parts of an education together.

From judging activities, the students may develop a critical eye and an honest dissatisfaction with the present quality of certain commercial flower crops in the marketplace.
From this dissatisfaction grows a desire to do better—to grow better plants, to handle plant crops properly, to provide better care information and procedures, and to be more decisive and skillful in the buying and selling of plants and flowers.

The culmination of flower judging at the college level is the Intercollegiate Flower Judging and Floral Design Contest hosted each year in the spring by one of many state universities offering 4-year horticultural programs. Teams from all over the country compete for awards and recognition at the contest and enjoy the opportunity to meet with fellow students and representatives from the horticultural industry. Participating faculty also have the chance to exchange ideas and to talk with students about opportunities in graduate school. The Intercollegiate Flower Judging Contest includes 24 to 30 classes of flower judging, several classes of floral design competition, tours of greenhouse and campus facilities, and recreational activities sponsored for the students by local horticulture clubs and Pi Alpha Xi chapters.

The Intercollegiate contest is sponsored jointly by the National Chapter of Pi Alpha Xi Honorary Society and the American Floral Endowment, a national foundation supporting floral research and education. The Intercollegiate Flower Judging and Floral Design Contest has been part of the education of many professionals in the floral industry for 50 years. With the exception of the years of 1943–1946, the national contest has been held continuously since 1938. To date, 2,640 undergraduate students have been members of judging teams at the national contest.

It is expensive to train flower judges and to conduct an intercollegiate flower judging contest. Major expenses include the wide variety of flower and plant material needed to judge throughout training and at the contest and travel expenses for the teams. Pi Alpha Xi National and the American Floral Endowment provide financial support to the host school plus travel expenses and awards to contest participants. Judging team alumni in the industry and in state trade associations assist by providing flowers, space for judging, and even money for team expenses. The students themselves provide support through club activities and money-raising projects.

At Penn State, the flower judging team is one of a dozen that benefits from support by the College of Agriculture. Our team is also supported by the Penn State Horticulture Club and the Gamma Chapter of Pi Alpha Xi. Support from industry, universities, and judging alumni is always encouraged and is important if this very worthwhile activity is to prosper and grow.

All colleges and universities that have a 4-year program in floriculture are eligible to send a team to the contest and are encouraged to do so. New teams are always welcome, and changing participation serves to measure the vitality of floricultural programs at the university level. Participation over the last few years has shown a slight trend downward from the peak of 24 schools at Calloway Gardens, Pine Mountain, Ga. in 1979 (Fig. 1). Participation depends somewhat on the location of the contest. However, the recent gradual decline (1982–88) probably also reflects the effects of increased team expenses and changing priorities in horticulture departments at the universities.

Quality would seem to be the goal of everyone. Students who have participated in flower-judging activities make better floriculturists and improve the industry. In flower judging, we learn what really makes marketable plants and flowers in different situations, then we put that knowledge into practice for everyone’s benefit. At a time when the floral industry is expanding and becoming more international, it seems particularly important that floriculture students (our future industry leaders) are able to assess quality and identify marketable standards for floral crops. And, I would expand this judgement to other horticultural commodities, contending that crop evaluation should be an essential part of a “back to basics” horticultural curriculum.

References
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