

# Awards Photography – Can We Improve Image Quality?

Charlie McMonagle & John Kemp

## Introduction

The Registrar-General has received complaints about the quality of photographs submitted with AOC Awards over the past two years, the most recent being:- “I do not profess to be an expert, however, the following poor standards were obvious:

- Overexposure (due often to inappropriate or over use of flash photography);
- Inappropriate background. (This ranges from other flowers in the same photo to fluoro lights in the background distorting the colours of the subject plant);
- Inadequate backdrops or poor choice of colour. (A purple backdrop for a purple flower simply does not work).”

The extent to which photographs of AOC Awards are deficient can be gauged by reference to award photos from other national bodies and some individual photographers in *OrchidWiz* or in *Orchids Plus*, the website for awards by the American Orchid Society (AOS). Further, since the AOC Guidelines require judges to benchmark against previous awards, it is important that award images, as published on the AOC web site and in *Orchids Australia*, are of a suitable quality.

The authors examine the causes of poor quality award photographs and suggest measures that could be taken to raise the standard.

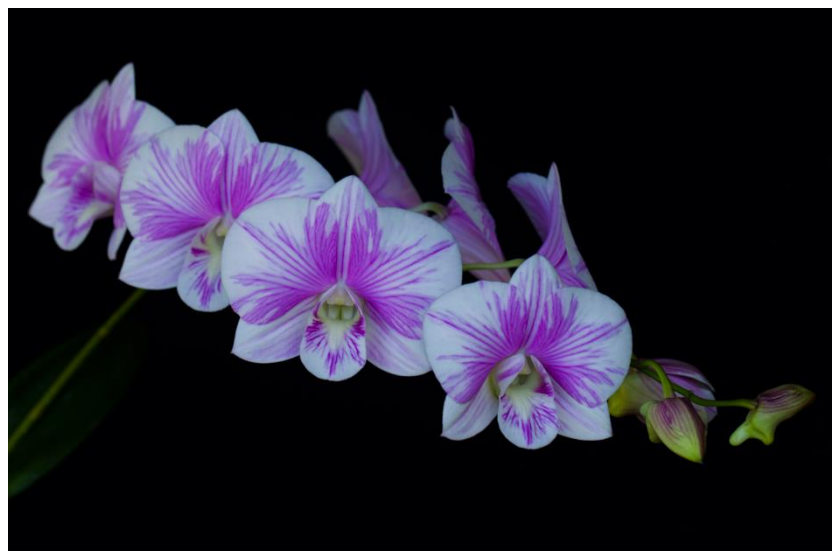
## Causes of Poor Photographs

In addition to the 3 items listed in the introduction, the following defects have been observed:-

- Incorrect white balance. Daylight, flash, incandescent, and fluorescent lighting all require different white balance settings but many photographers fail to adjust their cameras to the appropriate white balance setting. Incorrect white balance affects the colour of flowers,
- Flowers out of focus. This is sometimes caused by using autofocus where the focus is set on an element in the background or foreground,
- Camera shake. Not uncommon if hand held cameras, particularly mobile phones, are used; more of an issue where slow shutter speeds are selected, either because of poor light or small aperture,
- Inadequate depth of field because a large aperture has been used, most common with close-ups or photos of small flowers, or inadequate light,
- Flowers not filling the frame or extending outside the frame of the image,
- Contributing to all of the above is the time pressure often placed on a photographer at the conclusion of judging, particularly at the end of a show where everyone is in a hurry to leave.

## AOC Guidelines

The *Guidelines for Judging Handbook* specifies the images required for the various classes of award and the July 2016 Revision set minimum requirements which, if adhered would overcome most of the defects listed above. The requirements of the AOS Guidelines are much more comprehensive and are strictly enforced with the result that by and large, the quality of AOS award images is significantly better. As images of AOC awards are used for benchmarking and are now posted on the AOC web page and on *OrchidWiz*, it is important that we strive to improve the quality of our images.



## Steps Towards Better Photographs

### 1. People

Judging panels should encourage competent photographers, not only judges

Den. Banyad Pink 'Coya' AD/AOC

Photographer John Kemp

but other members to become involved in award photography. People showing an interest should be encouraged and mentored by more experienced photographers. Training sessions from time to time would also be helpful.

## **2. Environment**

Photographers need to be given an area in which operate that is free of onlookers and other distractions except for assistants who may be required to hold a backdrop in place. Ideally, photos should be taken in daylight but not in the sun.

## **3. Equipment**

- A reasonable quality camera with a good quality lens is a basic requirement. A macro lens is preferred for small flowers but not essential.
- The camera should be mounted on a tripod for best results.
- If photographs must be taken at night or in poor light, a macro flash is preferred. Pop-up or built-in flashlights on some cameras rarely produce a satisfactory result. If macro flash is not available, a flashlight attached via the camera's hot shoe or mounted off-camera can be used, preferably with a diffuser to minimise shadows on the background.
- Suitable backdrops of sufficient size should be available. Black is not necessarily the best, particularly for dark coloured flowers. The backdrop should be sufficiently large to fill the frame of the image, particularly in the case where an image of the whole plant is required such as for cultural awards.

## **4. Technique**

- Remove labels, ribbons, clips and ties to the extent possible,
- Place the subject plant on a table, stand or other support so the photographer can work at a convenient height. If photographing the whole plant, cover the pot and any support with a dark cloth,
- Select a suitable backdrop and place it as far as possible behind the subject. This will minimise shadows,
- Mount the camera on a tripod. If a tripod is not available, steady the camera against some solid object to minimise shake.
- Set the camera up with the correct white balance and appropriate ISO,
- Focus on the subject. Manual focus is preferable. Check the depth of field and adjust settings to achieve the best result,
- Take some test shots to check exposure, focus, and depth of field, adjusting as necessary to achieve the best result.
- Take your time and don't be pressured into completing the shoot before you are satisfied with the result,
- No manipulation such as adjustment of colour or touching up to remove defects is permitted. Cropping and minor adjustments to exposure using Photoshop or similar software are acceptable.



V. Suk Samran Beauty Photographer John Kemp

When preparing images for transmission to the Registrar, retain a resolution that produces a file of at least 1Mb as required by the *Guidelines*. Higher resolution is preferred as it enhances the quality of the printed image.

As a further incentive to improve awards photography, growers need to be aware that the *AOC Orchid of the Year* competition is judged from photographs circulated to all AOC judges and poorly photographed plants are at a serious disadvantage.

## **References**

*Guidelines for Judging Handbook V1.4* July 2017, The Australian Orchid Council,  
[http://www.orchidsaustralia.com.au/AOCdownloads/AOC\\_judging\\_handbook.pdf](http://www.orchidsaustralia.com.au/AOCdownloads/AOC_judging_handbook.pdf)

*Judging Handbook* 2015 Edition, The American Orchid Society <http://www.aos.org/orchid-awards-judging/judging-handbook.aspx>