Perhaps the single greatest attribute of our wonderful flower is its color. How many times have you been asked the question “Are they real?!?” by someone walking through our Parma show? The public’s fascination at our shows is substantially based on the size and the huge range of colors of the blooms we display.

Unlike some other national dahlia organizations, the ADS has done a good job of retaining a great range of colors in our shows. Keith Hammett, the dahlia and clivia guru from New Zealand, has applauded the ADS approach to classifying (and showing and judging) dahlias in that we have managed to retain and promote the diversity of colors we continue to see at our shows.

Color is a key element in our judging of dahlias, comprising 22% of the score for seedlings. Our Guide to Judging Dahlias goes through a fairly detailed explanation of color characteristics. There are a couple elements of that explanation we all need to know. Perhaps the key one is that the intensity or the saturation of a color in a dahlia does not translate to the quality of the color of the dahlia. That is, “if color is uniformly distributed in both a yellow pastel dahlia and a more saturated yellow one, the quality of color is not better in one than the other.” (GJD, p.11) For example, the color on a good Light Accord is of the same quality as that on a good Hamari Accord, even though the color on the Hamari Accord is more intense.

The picture at the right shows the B SC Y section at the Puget Sound Dahlia Society Show in 2011 (before Light Accord was changed to 2013 Seedling from Blossom Gulch Seed “N”
(It is also an example of a cultivar with a “two-tone” blend. Remember that question in the judge’s exam?)

Apparently women have a greater sensitivity to see color than men. This might be an even better area than most to listen to what our female colleagues have to say (at least on the subject of the quality of color in an entry). :-) Thank you, ladies!

Color is one of the attributes where somewhat different criteria apply between show and seedling judging. If you are judging a seedling in a Trial Garden and observe a tendency for the cultivar to have “wolf petals” (petals of a different color, often white) or to exhibit streaks of other colors in the florets in many of the blooms, it should be penalized relatively severely for Color. On the other hand, if you are judging a cultivar in a show and it exhibits a wolf petal or a couple streaks, perhaps at the back of the bloom, the penalty should be relatively slight. In the TG, you are making a decision on the future performance of the entry. If it is likely to forever exhibit that color weakness, the scoring penalty should be substantial. (GJD, p.11)

What are the other key color characteristics we need to have in mind in judging a seedling or a class at a show? Color uni-
formity throughout each ray floret is the first item cited in the judging manual. That assessment, like most, should be made at arm’s length. If we examine the bloom a few inches from our eyes, color variations, particularly at the base of the florets, will almost certainly be detected. The surface texture of the florets should be lustrous and appealing. Blends should exhibit uniform color distribution. Bicolors should have uniform, consistent color distributions with little bleeding of the colors into each other. Note, too, that bicolors should either be striped or show the second color just at the tips (1/6 to 1/4) of the ray florets. Variegated cultivars will have uniform base color(s!) throughout the floret with stripes or flecks of a contrasting color uniformly distributed on all the florets.

Color faults include colors that are dull, splotchy, streaked, faded, and blooms that exhibit distracting bracts, petaloids with a different color, or blends with a poor distribution of the second color. In show judging, bruising from travel damage, insect damage, and spray deposits can be color faults. With these faults in mind, and with the discussion of fault observations among your show judging team, a decision on which is the best among show entries can be reasonably straightforward. If, on the other hand, you are working by yourself in a Trial Garden and you need to come up with a point penalty for an entry, the challenge is more substantial.

Let’s consider the example on the right. The first step, of course, is to determine the color. What would you suggest? I would think that red with a yellow eye zone (i.e., S RD/y) might be best. The TG, with the benefit of being able to see a lot of blooms, concluded that it was a dark blend of dark red and yellow (i.e., S DB DR/Y). That determination emphasizes the yellow at the tips of the ray florets as well as the eye zone yellow at their base. Ok, judges, how are going to get to
a point penalty??

Begin by identifying the faults. You probably start with nonuniformity, like I do. It is pretty obvious, both on the tips of the ray florets and the eye zones. The streaking along the veins is also pretty obvious. Those ray florets at 5 and 6 o’clock show some blotchiness, too. Next, ask yourself if this is a “passing” color. You probably say no; I do too. If you don’t have a lot of judging experience, you might want to refer back to your old copies of my previous seminar presentations. (-:-) (The Guide to Judging Dahlias does not provide a lot of help in translating fault observations to numeric deductions.) My opinion is that a passing score would correspond to the observation of not more than a few minor faults. That is largely a consequence of my seedling judging experience. If we were to translate our observations above, to one major, one minor, and one very minor fault, what should the deduction be? My answer would be to give color less than 80%, perhaps a 6 point penalty.

Having said all that about that example, I went back in my files to see what I actually did when I evaluated that entry in the Spokane TG. I classified it as S DB RD22/YL18/y118 (i.e. as a blend with an eye zone). My comments were “Bad streaks, non-uniform, blotchy” and I took 8 points off for color. I wonder if the yellow on the tips was more obvious in person that it is in the photograph. There is no substitute for experience in generating numeric penalties. Latch on to one of the Senior Judges at a show and walk through their scoring process. Take a scoresheet out into your garden and ‘play’ with your seedlings!

I went back to look at my November 2013 column and have concluded that there were a couple tough color assignments there. Determining the colors of our open-centered Blossom Gulch seedlings is going to help us learn a lot about the characterization of color! Please look at Lou Paradise’s procedure for classifying open-centered dahlias on pages 6 and 7 in the new 2014 CHD. With that guidance in hand, see what you come up with for the classification of the seedling at left. I’ll talk about it next month.

Ron