Some of you will remember a discussion at the DSO show last September where there was some disagreement on the relative importance of faults associated with foliage and stems. I hope you DSO judges out there are now thinking that the relative importance of those attributes is pretty obvious. Foliage and Stem are equally important and each is about half as important as Color and one-third as important as Form. That is because when you are judging a seedling, Stem and Foliage are each 10 points, while Color is 22 points and Form is 28 points. If that is what you are thinking, you are right!

The translation of those principles to an actual judging situation at a dahlia show, however, can lead to differing opinions. What should you do in that situation? The basic answer to that question is also pretty straightforward; you listen to and respect the opinions of the other judges on your team, present your views based on your understanding of Guide to Judging Dahlias (GJD), and then adopt the majority view. The consequence for me of the discussion at the show was a nice conversation with our guest, Wayne Shantz, while we looked at some blooms on my deck the following Tuesday.

Here are a couple of the blooms we talked about. Ignore the blooms and the staging to the extent you can. :-) What do you think about the foliage of the two “entries?” You might want to have your CHD in your hand; we did. If you were looking at either one of the entries, you would probably say that the foliage is pretty uniform and balanced. It is clean and looks reasonably “luxuriant.” When you get to “good proportion,” you might wonder if the pair of leaves on the left were a little small and if the pair on the right were a little large for the length
of the stem. Looking at the two of them side-by-side certainly emphasizes that difference between the two.

Recall that the GJD tells us that the length of the stem should be about 1.5 times as long as the spread of the first pair of leaves. In that context, it is clear that the leaves on the entry on the right are way too big. Those on the entry on the left may be a little short. Back in the old days, before I watched Wayne and Eleanor’s Judging Seminar DVD, I told you (incorrectly) that the length of the stem should about 1.5 times the diameter of the bloom. That is what the old judging manual said. (The current manual also says that the length of the stem, for small blooms like these, can be longer than the diameter of the bloom.)

If the two blooms were competing head-to-head in a show and the only issue that mattered was the foliage, which would you pick as the winner? Wayne and I concluded it was a tie. Wayne would have penalized either 1.5 points (passing) for foliage as a three-bloom SBE entry; I would have penalized them 2 points (failing, but close).

The foliage on the bloom at the right is obviously not great. The leaves at the lovely bend in the stem are not a pair of leaves; they are on a petiole (leaf stem) that comes off the bloom’s stem at the bend. They are not a pair of leaves. If you had that entry in your section at the show, what would you do with it? Once you conclude that it does not have a pair of leaves, you need to impose a heavy penalty. ADS requires a pair of leaves for exhibition. In that context, imposing a penalty of –10 would no be unreasonable. Remember to write the reason for the penalty on the show tag so the exhibitor understands the basis for the team’s decision.

Here’s a nice pair of leaves from the same plant (different entry) that meet the requirement.
The entry at the right has a pair of leaves, too, but “nice” is probably not the best adjective for at least one pair of them. Does “huge” come to mind? The bottom pair of leaves are actually fine; they’re balanced, composite, and perhaps on the large size. In fact, if the upper pair of leaves weren’t there, the foliage would be pretty good. The upper pair of leaves, however, are just way too big. The spur leaf, or pig ear is also way too big to be ignored. Wayne’s idea for a penalty on the foliage here was –2 or –3, i.e., well below passing. He also suggested that the foliage reflected an excess of nitrogen in the soil. It was cut from my lasagna bed and there could well have had a lot of nitrogen available in that compost!

Here are two pictures of the foliage on another entry. First, note that the size of the foliage is consistent with the length of the stem; that is, the spread of the foliage is about 1.5 times the length of the stem. Further, the stem is perhaps 1.5 to 2 times the diameter of the bloom. Thus, the proportions among bloom diameter, stem length, and the size of the foliage are pretty good. So does this guy deserve a 10? The answer is no. The lower picture makes it clear that the pig ear is too big. If it were small and more subtle it could be ignored. If it were smaller and the stem longer, it might actually improve the appearance of the entry. Here, however, it is just simply too big. In addition, take a look at the pair of
leaves in the lower picture. They are neither composite nor single. They are a bit of a cross between the two. On the other hand, the two halves are pretty similar and would be balanced if only they were directly opposite one another on the stem. Note, however, that is not the case. OK, so the foliage isn’t perfect; how big is the penalty for all of those problems? Wayne and I agreed that the foliage “passes,” but not by much. That is, a penalty of about 1.5 points would be appropriate.

The bottom line is that foliage is an important part of the evaluation of an entry. It needs not only to meet its own basic requirements (clean, good color, equal and opposite, turgid) but it must also provide good proportion to the stem and the bloom in the entry.

In the Midwest, we tend to complicate the evaluation by using two or even three sets of leaves on an entry. There are no specific or additional ADS judging guidelines to use in that situation. My perspective on it is that the outline of the additional foliage should form a triangle with the bloom; that is, it should taper to the top of the entry like a Christmas tree would. The additional leaves should also appear at right angles to the top pair just as the top pair should be at right angles to the face of the bloom. Be sure, if you choose to use more than the minimum required pair of leaves, that the additional foliage contributes to the appearance of the entry and that it does not detract from the main event—the bloom.

As you work on laying out your garden for this summer, make sure to leave some space for those Blossom Gulch seedlings from last year. The second-year BG seedlings will be the basis for the Judging Seminar at Petitti’s in the fall.

We will have two additional seminars this season. Jerry Moreno and Dave Cap will manage the seminar at the picnic. The general plan for that seminar will be a Trial Garden simulation. The third seminar will be on the evaluation of open-centered cultivars and will be in my garden. September 14 is the target date for that “seedling bed” judging project. I hope to be able to set up both SBE and TG evaluations of the same cultivars. You can help me to figure out which of those wonderful Blossom Gulch children (oops, I mean seedlings) I can let go!

Ron