Remember the Smokey the Bear ads? “Only you can prevent forest fires!” That is what came to mind as I thought about my walk through the Midwest Show with Dr. Hanu Pappu, Sam Smith Distinguished Professor of Plant Virology at Washington State University (WSU) and the leading dahlia virus expert in the world. While I wouldn’t say that “only you can prevent dahlia virus,” I would say that “only you can take giant steps to minimize dahlia virus in your garden.” It is also clear that our giant steps can have a big impact on the dahlia virus problem in North America.

I’m sure most of you know that Jim Chuey recently donated $350,000 from the Scheetz Chuey Charitable Foundation to establish the Carl Chuey Virus Research Fund at WSU. I had the privilege of helping Jim work out the details of the donation and to make sure that the ADS took best advantage of the investment. It let me make some small contribution in honoring Carl’s ongoing legacy to the betterment of our dahlias.

It was in the context of that contribution that I had the opportunity to walk through the Midwest Show with Dr. Pappu. I asked him to show me any examples of virus he saw as we walked through the show. It did not take long to find a couple examples. The one at the right was on the head table! I doubt, many of you would have said that you noticed those lowing veins and the yellowing
veins and the stiffening or brittle nature of the foliage. You might also have wondered how to distinguish virus from a nutritional problem. The other example we found is shown in the picture on the right. The yellowing of the leaves is even more obvious here. The picture below, right, is of a plant with similar leaves that was in my garden until the day after the show.

If you are wondering by now, what all of this virus talk has to do with judging, here is the answer. Check out p.28 of the Guide to Judging Dahlias. I quote: “Obvious signs of disease … should eliminate the exhibit from competition. Judges must exercise careful judgment since nutrient deficiencies may … resemble disease.” Before my little walk with Dr. Pappu, I used to use the second sentence in the above quotation to argue that it was best to stay away from judgments of “signs of disease” since one could not be certain of the cause of the appearance.

I have changed my mind! Please erase/forget my previous guidance on staying away from judgments on the presence of virus and, henceforth, substantially penalize an entry that exhibits leaves of the sort seen in the foregoing pictures. It was clear to Dr. Pappu that those yellowing veins and/or yellow, blotchy appearance, and/or a “mosaic - a mixture of dark and light green patches/islands” are a clear and virtually certain indication of the presence of virus. Dr. Pappu also said that “On a bright and sunny day, they may go unnoticed. But they can be more easily seen under shade.”

There is additional information on Dr. Pappu’s views on the appearance of virus on the ADS website, dahlia.org, as well as on the WSU website that is linked to the ADS website. One of the bits of counsel in his comments is that you should not keep the tubers from plants that
exhibit leaves with the virus and, further, that those plants should be removed as soon as the condition is recognized in order to prevent insects from spreading the virus to other plants in the garden.

What do you do with the tubers from plants that made it to the head table? What do you do with tubers from plants that win Blue ribbons? Chances are that you do not throw them out, even if you weren’t real comfortable with the appearance of the foliage. That, my friends, is the key link between our responsibility as judges and helping our “Dahlia Nation” get rid of virus. Let’s not encourage exhibitors to keep virused plants!

I apologize for giving you lousy counsel on judging virused foliage in the past. My new (enlightened! :)) advice is to use the following procedure when you encounter diseased foliage in an entry:

1) point out the problem to your judging team,
2) argue that it is a very serious fault (depending on the severity of discolorations), and
3) adopt the conclusion of the judging team.

You may get some unhappy exhibitors asking about the team’s decision. In that instance, refer them to the first sentence on p. 28 in the GJD and do not throw any of your team members under the bus. Remember that you adopt the team’s decision.

I had a great time at our judging seminar on September 21. The widely predicted rain never happened and we had warm and sunny weather (after we had moved pretty much everything inside). Probably the most challenging of the tasks assigned to the teams was the classification and evaluation of a group of 27 open-centered “seedlings.” Most of them were real Blossom Gulch seedlings but there were a few “ringers” that were from known cultivars. The assignment at this seedling table consisted of the determination of form, color,
and an undisseminated seedling score. We do not much use this last item in the Midwest, but it is a routine part of most shows on the West Coast. Check it out on p. 42 of the GJD; we’ll talk more about it in the future.

In general, the challenge in classifying the seedlings was to sort out to which “form mountain” it was closest. The example on the right has pointed and largely involute ray florets and it is trying to be an orchid. I asked Lou Paradise, a friend and ADS Classification Chairman, how far away from a “form mountain” an open-centered cultivar needs to be in order to be a Novelty Open. He said we shouldn’t be “trying to put blooms into the disc novelty class ... that are just bad representations of existing forms. Novel means exactly that, not just bad examples of form.” In this example 5/8 of the bloom’s florets are lousy orchid florets and 3/8 are lousy single florets, so I would probably call it a lousy orchid. When you look at page 42, figure out what score this guy would get!

Attention to detail is, of course, also critical. It was pretty easy to miss the fact that the disc florets on this striped bloom were tubular. Thus, even though the dome is not very well developed, this one is an Anemone. The ray florets are very visible from the front of the bloom. That positive counterbalances the lack of a well developed dome, at least to some extent.

The other challenge was in correctly capturing the color in written format. That is something that AC and SR judges should be able to do. (Of course, it is a good idea to have the CHD in your hand when you do it!) The color of the collarette on the right is a bit complicated. The ray florets are probably best described as a
bicolor of dark red with dark pink tips. The petaloids are variegated white with dark red flecks. Ok, having determined the color scheme, how do you write it down? The face color is first, in capital letters; the petaloid colors come next, in lower case letters; thus CO BI DR/DP / v w/dr is the classification.

The collarette on the right is a little more difficult because the face color is more complicated. Clearly, it is variegated with flecks of dark red; but what is the base color of the ray florets? The answer is that it is a blend of yellow at the base of the florets and (probably) dark pink at the outer half of the florets; call it a dark blend of yellow and dark pink. I chose dark blend because the dark pink is dominant and most dark pinks belong to the dark blend group. The bottom line is CO V DB(DP/Y)/ DR / v y/dr.

Capturing the colors of the new orchettes is the most complicated since you need to capture the colors of the reverse of the florets as the basic color class plus the two other features of the class: the face of the ray florets and the petaloids. The example on the right is an easy one inasmuch as each of those features are white. The colors are captured in the following format:

OT RAY FLORET REVERSE COLOR (U.C.)/ ray floret face color—petaloid color (l.c.). In this case; W/w-w. Now just picture the color description if the colors on the OT were as complex as those on the collarette above—and you need to include the chip numbers. :-)

Ron