

## TUBIE TEST-ING IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

JOYCE PROTHERO

Salt Spring Island, British Columbia V8K 2J7 Canada

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*What is this woman doing?*

At a superficial level, she's peering at sprigs of heather, trying to identify ones which have the largest percentage of florets open yet still fresh, trying not to favour longer racemes with many unopened buds over shorter racemes where all of the densely-packed florets are fully open yet still in prime condition.

But, more importantly, she's about to be confronted by the nature-versus-nurture conundrum. She'll discover differences among samples of the same cultivar when it is raised by different growers, and similarities among different cultivars when they are raised by the same grower. And she'll appreciate the merits of a superior cultivar when it is raised by an experienced grower.

Ultimately, she'll ask the more successful growers about where their prize-winning plants are situated and when they are mulched and pruned. And she'll begin to introduce some of the prize-winning cultivars into her garden.

For all these benefits, the Vancouver Island Heather Chapter of the North American Heather Society suggests that other heather groups might consider adding Tubie Tests to their range of educational programs.

### How Tubie Test-ing got started

It all began in the spring of 1999 because members of our Chapter wanted to encourage local garden clubs and fall fairs to include more classes on heather in their flower shows. But before we could seriously begin nudging other clubs, our Chapter felt that it needed to know a bit more about how heather is judged. A three-person working group was appointed to research the issue.

*'What are we trying to establish standards for?' was the question agonized over at the group's first meeting in June 1999. Were we interested in setting standards for an arrangement? a bouquet? a whole plant? or a single "stem"?* At the conclusion of that meeting we divided among ourselves the "homework" assignment of searching our Chapter's complete set of the Yearbooks and Bulletins issued by The Heather Society (THS) for information on the heather categories and standards used for judging winter and summer shows staged by the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) and the competitions staged by THS' regional groups. (We had already failed to discover any pertinent information in *Heather News*, issued by the North American Heather Society (NAHS), or in the revised edition of *Judging Standards*, just published by the British Columbia Council of Garden Clubs.)

## Gleanings from readings

From THS' yearbooks and bulletins we discovered much. It was interesting to learn, from the 1963 Yearbook, that as a newly-founded organization, THS proposed to stimulate interest in the growing of heather by arranging "displays and competitions at RHS and local shows." (As noted previously, our Chapter was motivated by a similar goal when it embarked on the odyssey leading to its Tubie Tests.)

We also learned that RHS' competitive classes for heather usually called for *pots* of plants grown in the open or vases of material from a single species or cultivar. Competitions organized by THS' regional groups generally were somewhat less daunting. For example, the table shows organized by the South West Group always included the same two classes: a vase or bowl of heathers in bloom, and a vase or bowl of heathers shown for foliage effect. Comparable categories were adopted by the Southern Group when it began holding competitions in 1991.

The March and August competitions organized by the Midlands Group contained four specialized classes as well as one for an arrangement of heathers in a basket. Specialized classes for the March competition included: *Erica carnea* in flower; *Erica* hybrid in flower; heather to be judged for foliage effect; and, tree heath in flower. For the August competition, they were: any *Erica cinerea* in flower – in an Oasis block ; any *Erica vagans* in flower – in an Oasis block; any *Calluna* in flower – in an Oasis block; and, any *Calluna* for foliage effect – in an Oasis block.

From what we could discern, most of the competitive classes mentioned above were adjudicated by qualified judges or experienced heather growers. Only in the South West Group were the entries judged through the popular vote of those in attendance.

The practical aspects of showing heather were addressed only in the 1975 Yearbook where an article by Terry Underhill advises, from a judge's perspective, how best to select and prepare entries for heather competitions. (An expansion of this information appears in Underhill, 1990.) No other information on judging standards was gleaned from the yearbooks or bulletins. (Several months later, through personal communications, we were able to obtain a list of RHS' judging guidelines for meritorious and defective qualities of entries in heather competitions.)

The judging standards working group met again in August 1999 to share findings and consider future activities. It decided to report progress to the next membership meeting by "judging" a few stems of flowering heather using the information from Underhill's article. This report was sufficiently well-received that a "trial-run parlour show" was scheduled for the following spring.

### Trial-Run Parlour Show

Despite its grandiose title, our original parlour show was aptly named because our small group rotated its meetings through the living rooms of its members. Thus, of necessity, the Trial-Run Parlour Show, held in March 2000, adopted a small-scale, easily staged, participatory approach. Small Scale. Beginning as we did in a crowded living room with the top of a card table serving as a staging area, we were forced to "think small." We limited the size of exhibits to three stems of a heath or heather, a "stem" being defined as a season's growth above the last natural branching or last pruning cut. For containers, we used tubies, a "tubie" being a plastic test-tube size cylinder with a pointed base and one-holed cap used by florists for holding water for a single floral stem – but no water fills our tubies exhibits because, fortunately, heathers remain fresh without it. To stabilize the tubies, we used low flat cartons, such as shoeboxes, with holes punched into their



lids. For judging purposes, a unique number was permanently affixed to each tubie.

Easily Staged. Set-up was quick and simple. The hostess set up a card table, and the organizers brought several shoe boxes (one for each competition class) with perforated lids, one containing numbered tubies, another containing writing materials such as pens, pencils, labels, judging slips, and tally worksheets. Set-up was complete when the contents of the boxes were spread on the card table and the lids replaced on the boxes.

Participatory. So that all members, experienced growers and novice enthusiasts alike, would feel confident in selecting heather for exhibition and in evaluating the exhibits, we prepared a one-page Show Announcement. This announcement, distributed about a month before the event, described the competition classes, entry procedures, and judging criteria (as gleaned from our readings and personal communications). Thus, when selecting entries for a tubie test, an exhibitor could wander through his or her garden, judging criteria in hand, to identify those stems that best corresponded to “meritorious” criteria and avoided “defective” criteria. When organizing their exhibits at the meeting, exhibitors were encouraged to write the name of each cultivar on a removable label and then affix the label to the tubie holding that cultivar. The exhibitor’s own name was not associated with the entry, however, so that a non-competitive environment would be maintained.

Active participation continued into the judging phase when all in attendance, usually in spontaneously-formed dyads or triads, objectively evaluated the entries using the judging criteria on the Show Announcement. Informal conversations within these groupings helped members compare the quality of entries and learn more about the various cultivars being exhibited. When judging was complete, the meeting continued with other business while several volunteers quietly used preprinted tally forms to record the judging slips and total the results. Near the end of the program, results were announced and a short discussion ensued.

### **Guidelines for Staging a Tubie Test**

Since conducting the Trial-Run Parlour Show in March 2000, our Chapter has held four more shows. During that interval, as membership increased so that we were forced to move our meetings to a small community hall. After this move, fearful that the term “Parlour Show” might be interpreted as a formal competition rather than an informal close-up study of heather, we began using the term “Tubie Tests” to refer to our periodic table-top scrutiny sessions. We recommend Tubie Tests as an enjoyable way to study heather “close up” and would like to share our current approach to organizing this activity.

Issuing the Show Announcement: To be most useful, a Tubie Test should be scheduled for a time when most exhibitors will have access to their best material; in our growing area near the eastern coast of Vancouver Island, we find March and September to be ideal. Because we

encourage all members currently growing heathers to participate in the Tubie Tests, we issue a “full disclosure” announcement well in advance of the event which describes the time and place for the Tubie Test, the competition classes, entry procedures, and judging criteria. While each organization might need to adjust this announcement to reflect local situations, we have found the following competition classes, entry procedures and judging criteria to be understandable and adequate.

### Competition Classes

The content of the competitive classes should reflect the range of species and hybrids most prevalent in members’ gardens; the number of classes scheduled will reflect the estimated number of exhibits, the space available for set-up, and program time available for judging activities. Our Chapter has found that following three classes adequately accommodate the heathers available in our members’ gardens:

#### March Tubie Test

CLASS 1: Any *Erica carnea*, in flower, one to three stems, all from the same plant, judged for flowers  
CLASS 2: Any *Erica x darleyensis*, in flower, one to three stems, all from the same plant, judged for flowers  
CLASS 3: Any heath or heather, non-flowering, one to three stems, all from the same plant, judged for foliage effect

#### September Tubie Test

CLASS 1: Any double-flowered *Calluna*, in flower, one to three stems, all from the same plant, judged for flowers  
CLASS 2: Any single-flowered *Calluna*, in flower, one to three stems, all from the same plant, judged for flowers  
CLASS 3: Any *Erica* or *Daboecia*, in flower, one to three stems, all from the same plant, judged for flowers.

### Entry procedures

The following entry procedures mean that the only exhibitor pre-meeting activity is gathering his or her entries. Everything else for staging an entry is provided by the organizers.

There are no limits on the number of entries for each class.  
Containers will be provided.  
Labels for affixing cultivar name to container will be provided.  
Judging will be by all present at meeting.

### Judging criteria

We’ve combined the judging guidelines appearing in RHS’ Horticultural Show Handbook (obtained by personal communication from an English heather grower) and the award system published in *Heaths and Heathers* (Underhill, 1990, p316). As a result, the judging criteria used are as follows:

MERITORIOUS: Good condition; long, straight spikes of evenly spaced florets or large umbels with florets symmetrically arranged; few unopened buds; no faded florets; corollas undamaged; foliage clean, bright-coloured and healthy.

DEFECTIVE: Unsatisfactory condition; spikes that are short, crooked or uneven, or thinly or irregularly furnished with flowers; buds not yet open; florets fading or turning brown; corollas pierced by insects; foliage that is dull, withered or unhealthy.

POINTS: Condition, 6 points; spikes, 6 points; colour, 4 points; uniformity, 4 points; total points, 20.

Setting up the meeting room. It is ideal to have a separate table/work area for each Class. The base for holding the exhibits should be easily accessible and clearly labelled with the class number and description (it's amazing how easily entries end up in the wrong category!). All the necessary supplies (tubies, labels, judging slips, pens/pencils) for that Class should be in the designated area.

Tubies. We continue to use numbered tubies. The hole in the centre of the rubber cap is sufficiently large to accept two or three sturdy stems of heather yet pliable enough to permit a motivated exhibitor to do some arranging of the spikes.

Base for holding tubies. We currently use upturned hexagonal-shaped wooden planter boxes, with holes drilled in their former bottom, as bases for holding the tubies. It is ideal to have a separate base for each Class so that the exhibitors will have sufficient workspace for organizing their entries. It also is advisable to prominently label and colour-code each base so that exhibitors will be more likely to get their exhibits into the correct Class.

Removable labels for affixing cultivar name to tubie. Exhibitors can use small labels to identify the cultivar name for each exhibit. In our early shows we let exhibitors place the cultivar name on a piece of paper and lay it on the cardboard base near the location of the tubie. Over time, we realized that it was better to attach the label to the tubie so that, if the tubie was moved, the name would stay with it. (The downside of affixing the label to the tubie rather than laying a piece of paper on the platform holding the tubie is a longer, slower post-show clean-up - even "removable" labels take a long time to remove!) During the judging phase, if entries are clearly labelled, the evaluators can learn cultivar names, check the *Handy Guide* for cultivar characteristics, and compare different samples from the same cultivar — all good learning experiences.

Judging Slips for each Class. Each Judging Slip should be pre-printed with a description of the Class being judged and have designated spaces for recording the tubie numbers associated with the best, second-best and third-best entries. The Judging Slips for a particular Class should be the same colour as the label on the base holding the entries; the coordination of colour will increase the likelihood that, within each Class, the correct Judging Slip is used for judging the entries. Enough Judging Slips should be prepared so that there will be one for each person in attendance for each of the Classes.

Tally Worksheet for Enumerators. It took several shows before we recognized the need for a formal Tally Worksheet. The form we developed provides a four-column grid so that a tubie number (and cultivar name, if available) can be written in the left-hand column and first-, second-, and third-place votes can be tallied in the second, third, and fourth columns respectively. It then is relatively simple to add across the rows in order to identify the top three vote-getters. The Tally Worksheet not only simplifies the task of tabulating the Judging Slips, but also generates a lasting record of the results.

Concluding a Tubie Test. We must admit that there never seems to be enough time in our meeting to adequately discuss the judging results and, more importantly, consider their implications for the selection, care, and maintenance of heathers in the garden. We can attest that individual learning has occurred but, unfortunately, not shared generally. We offer no solution to this problem as yet.

## **Results and Reactions**

The results of our first five Tubie Tests (see chart) reveal the range of heath and heather cultivars that flourish near the coastal areas of southern British Columbia. Interestingly, 15 of the 29 cultivars selected by our amateur judges also hold the Award of Garden Merit which is conferred by RHS after extensive garden trials. Sixteen of the 29 also appear on the "Elegant Eighty" list prepared by David Wilson, the heather guru of the Fraser Valley, as representing the range of cultivars that flourish in the southwest corner of Canada. Twelve of the 29 are present on both lists. So much for the statistics!

## Winners of the Tubie Tests

<i>Class Description</i>	<i>First</i>	<i>Second</i>	<i>Third</i>
<b>MARCH 1, 2000</b>			
Class 1 – 1-3 stems, same plant, in flower	<i>E.x.d.</i> 'Kramer's Rote'	<i>E.c.</i> 'King George'	<i>E.x.d.</i> 'Kramer's Rote'
Class 2 – 1-3 stems, same plant, foliage effect	<i>C.v.</i> 'Robt Chapman'	<i>C.v.</i> 'Beoley Gold'	<i>E.cin.</i> 'Golden Drop'
<b>SEPTEMBER 6, 2000</b>			
Class 1 – <i>Calluna</i> , double, 1-3 stems, same plant, in flower	<i>C.v.</i> 'Kinlochruel'	<i>C.v.</i> 'Mick Jamieson'	<i>C.v.</i> 'Elsie Purnell'
Class 2 – <i>Calluna</i> , single, 1-3 stems, same plant, in flower	<i>C.v.</i> 'Aberdeen'	<i>C.v.</i> 'White Lawn'	<i>C.v.</i> 'Allegro'
Class 3 – Any <i>Erica/Daboecia</i> , 1-3 stems, same plant, flower	<i>E.v.</i> 'Mrs D.F. Maxwell'	<i>E.x.watsonii</i> 'Truro'	<i>E.cil.</i> 'Corle Castle'
<b>OCTOBER 4, 2000</b>			
Class 1 – <i>Calluna</i> , double, 1-3 stems, same plant, in flower	<i>C.v.</i> 'Elsie Purnell'	<i>C.v.</i> 'H.E. Beale'	<i>C.v.</i> 'Jimmy Dyce'
Class 2 – <i>Calluna</i> , single, 1-3 stems, same plant, in flower	<i>C.v.</i> 'Corbett's Red'	<i>C.v.</i> 'Marlene'	<i>C.v.</i> 'Olive Turner'
<b>MARCH 7, 2001</b>			
Class 1 – <i>Erica carnea</i> , 1-3 stems, same plant, in flower	<i>E.c.</i> 'Vivelli'	<i>E.c.</i> 'Springwood Wh'	<i>E.c.</i> 'Golden Starlet'
Class 2 – <i>E.x darleyensis</i> , 1-3 stems, same plant, in flower	(disqualified) <sup>1</sup>	<i>E.x.d.</i> 'Kramer's Rote'	<i>E.x.d.</i> 'Kramer's Rote'
Class 3 – Any heather, 1-3 stems, same plant, foliage effect	<i>C.v.</i> 'Firefly'	<i>E.cin.</i> 'Golden Drop'	<i>C.v.</i> 'Blazeaway'
<b>OCTOBER 3, 2001</b>			
Class 1 – <i>Calluna</i> , double, 1-3 stems, same plant, in flower	<i>C.v.</i> 'H.E. Beale'	<i>C.v.</i> 'Annemarie'	<i>C.v.</i> 'Peter Sparkes'
Class 2 – <i>Calluna</i> , single, 1-3 stems, same plant, in flower	<i>C.v.</i> 'Aberdeen'	<i>C.v.</i> 'Foxii Florabunda'	<i>C.v.</i> 'Marleen'
Class 3 – Any <i>Erica/Daboecia</i> , 1-3 stems, same plant, flower	<i>E.x.wat.</i> 'Truro'	<i>E.cil.</i> 'Mawesana'	<i>E. fet.</i> 'Hookstone Pink'
<sup>1</sup> First place was won by <i>E. carnea</i> 'Springwood Pink' — it was disqualified because it had been entered in the wrong Class.			

Now, we paraphrase a few of the comments from members of our Chapter. Participants liked the small scale of the exhibits because “the brain can’t take it all in at once,” and the criteria-based judging because it offered a chance to look closely and absorb and “to identify what’s what and who’s who.” Although one individual found the Tubie Tests “a bit intimidating because my heather aren’t like that,” she liked being able to “see how a heather was supposed to look.” The observations of one participant changed her approach to pruning, from that of “hands off” to a carefully selective removal of spent inflorescences at their branching point so that young basal shoots would produce long straight flowering stems.

Much of the post-judging discussion related to the growing conditions of the plants producing prize-winning inflorescences. One participant summarized the impact of the Tubie Tests by saying that “the benefits of conducting these tests is increasing members’ knowledge of different species, and the best locations and conditions for growing.”

It should be evident that Tubie Test-ing has increased our Chapter’s awareness of the nature-versus-nurture aspect of raising healthy heathers. We invite all heather enthusiasts to systematically scrutinize stems of heather at the table-top level – either at the kitchen table or as a participant in a Tubie Test.

### References

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