

TIPS FOR IMPROVED FLOWER PHOTOGRAPHY- Easily

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This is about Improving Flower Photography, but the emphasis is how to do that with any camera you have, without expensive additional equipment, and things done easily. There will be some pointers for those more experienced folks with Big Black Cameras, so if that is your situation, don't worry.

The basic idea is to make our photos stand out from the rest; to create something unique and inspiring; something with that "wow" factor. These tips will provide a starting point to getting more creative images of flowers and inspire you to try techniques and ideas that you may not have tried before. Trying some of these will get us all out shooting more, and that can't be a bad thing.

Main Topic Categories:

- Planning
- Perspective and Composition
- Focus and Movement
- Lighting
- Advanced Topics

Planning:

When going out to make photographs, plan ahead a bit and pre-determine:

- Who** else will be there
- (When)** what time of day)
- Where** will I go
- Why** will I take the photos? Who will be the audience?
- How will I take them** (what camera, what other equipment based on how far to walk, flash?, VAL?, tripod?)
- How long** will I shoot => can I deliberate on shots, or squeezed for time?
- What** will I shoot

Just plain photographers have it tough- there are millions of Whats to shoot.

ROSE-photographers have it much easier....Only two choices: One rose, or a garden

So you arrive at the scene: You assess the possibilities ... Take a few of the garden, maybe more later, then off to the individual plants and stems.

Perspective and Composition:

Perspective- Change your Point of View

One common mistake, is to simply put the camera to your eye and shoot away. We all generally see the world at *eye level*, so what you will end up with are images that are quite often just boring images. In order to make images that are a little more creative and dynamic, you will need to change your perspective a little. This means that you will need to get up high or down

low and shoot at different angles. The key is to try different things, or 'work the scene' as it is so often called. Don't just settle for the status quo, but become more deliberate and shoot for an end result that will be more creative.

You may decide to shoot straight down at the flower, or perhaps shoot from your knees so that you are shooting from the same height as the flowers, or maybe even lying down and shooting up at the flowers. The subject, the background, and the light will dictate what angles will work best in a particular situation. Either way, wear clothing that you won't mind getting dirty and don't be afraid to get down as low as you can go. Experiment with different camera angles to find what works best for you.

Perspective- Plan the Background

This one is pretty basic, but should not be overlooked. We've all seen images of flowers, birds, people, etc. that have a **cluttered or ugly background**. The main subject gets lost in the mess and the photo just doesn't work. Flowers are beautiful and our images of them should accentuate that beauty as much as possible. Compose the image in a way that keeps the flower the predominant focus by avoiding things that will be distracting. Keep in mind that **distractions come in many forms, such as having too much of the image in focus, uncomplimentary patterns or colors, or areas of the image that are too bright ('hot spots')**. All of these things will cause the viewer's eyes to wander and possibly lose interest in the star of the photo.

Avoid a cluttered background

As with every photograph, the background can make or break the image. Try to change your position so that there is nothing distracting behind your flower. and thoughtful when making these images. The end result should be pleasing and maybe even inspire others to get out and enjoy making images of the natural world.

Perspective- Garden location isn't everything

You may think that you need to travel to some exotic location to take beautiful flower photos, but that's just not the case. One of the nice things about flower photography is you don't even have to leave home. The flower garden in the back yard might be a good place to start, or possibly the city park down the street. Perhaps there is a botanical garden in your area where you could shoot a wide variety of flowers.

% On the other hand... **Use the best subjects**. Often that is your back yard, if your roses are in season. But if not peak season go to a friend's nearby garden if there are more. Flowers, then public parks like Norwich, Boothe, Elizabeth Park, Roger Williams Park.... See ctrose.org for other public parks. And if at a big garden, be sure to take wide view pictures of the garden, not just closeups.

Perspective- Look at the Big Picture

Sometimes showing more of the surroundings will make for a more interesting and engaging image. Perhaps there's not just a single flower you want to focus on, but rather several flowers, or even an entire field of flowers. Or maybe there are some wildflowers growing next to a stream and you want to include some of the water to provide context for the image. You've probably heard the expression "can't see the forest for the trees" and that can apply in flower photography. Sometimes we find ourselves getting so caught up in focusing on the details that I forget to step back and just look at the bigger picture. Details are great, but it may be a good

idea to include some images that will tell more of the story. So take a few steps back or put a wide-angle lens on your camera and take in more of the scene. And... look up and look down.

Get up Close

Flowers are such beautiful things and some are so intricately detailed that you will want to shoot as close as possible. The best choice for this would be to use a dedicated macro lens on your camera. (This includes the Macro feature on a P&S, but you need to know how to use it. Often this is the Flower Setting, or Tulip). A macro lens will allow you to get really close and still be able to focus on the flower. Beware that when shooting up close, the depth of field will be razor thin, and could present some challenges for getting enough of the flower in focus. If there is enough light available, you can stop your lens down (increase the aperture number) to f/11, f/16, or even f/22 (BBC). Doing this will increase the depth of field, but will require you to lower the shutter speed and/or raise the ISO to compensate for the smaller opening in the lens. Another method that I have used with some success is to back up a little, taking the picture a greater distance from the flower, then cropping the image in post-processing to provide a closer view. With the amount of megapixels at our disposal in modern cameras, it is possible to crop pretty aggressively and still get a high quality image.

Get closer

First, you can use a telephoto lens and zoom in to the flower. In this case, make sure you take note of the minimum focussing distance of the lens. This is usually marked on the outside of the lens. For example, my 70-200mm telephoto lens has a minimum focusing distance of 4.6 feet. It simply will not focus on anything closer.

There are a couple of solutions for getting around the minimum focussing distance problem. One is to use extension tubes which are hollow tubes that you place between the camera and the lens. Essentially the tubes move the lens farther away from the camera's sensor which allows the lens to focus on closer objects. The other solution is to use a close-up filter which works like a magnifying glass and attaches to the end of your lens.

Finally, you can use a dedicated macro lens which has the ability to focus on objects that are close to the end of the lens.

Get Closer still!!

Movement means a blurry photo... Issues: the camera and the subject

Crisp and In-Focus:

Crisp- Camera Movement

A tripod may not always be necessary when shooting flowers, but if you shoot macro or close-up images, you will need to mount the camera and lens on a very steady base. When creating these types of shots, you will likely be near the minimum focus distance of your lens, zoomed in close, and have a very thin depth of field. Hand-holding the camera may work, but even in **good lighting conditions** you could end up with a lot of blurry photos due to camera shake.

One advantage of using a tripod is that it will force you to slow down and take your time setting up the best compositions for the shot.

Crisp- Flower Movement

It seems that whenever I decide to go out shooting flowers, and particularly macro or close-up shots, the wind is invariably blowing. Even the slightest breeze can really make these types of shots a real challenge. It may seem like a calm day, but you will be surprised how much a flower will move, especially right when you want to take the shot. For this reason, it's a good idea to have something with you that can be used to block the wind to keep the flower from moving around while you are trying to focus and get the shot. Any number of things could be used for this, such as a reflector, diffuser, a small board, or even an umbrella.

The easiest way to avoid it is to do your photography early in the morning when there is less chance of wind.

Use a Plamp or a VAL

You are probably thinking that this is a typo and should read "clamp", and you are actually not far off. A Plamp, or plant clamp, is essentially two clamps at either end of an articulating arm. This gadget is something that you will find many uses for, especially when shooting flowers. Clamp one end to a tripod leg or to ground nearby and the other end to the stem of the rose.

Lighting:

Where you are on the Exposure Triangle is defined by the Histogram on your camera

Lighting- Photograph flowers on an overcast day

Okay, not every day in spring is a sunshiny blue sky day. But that's okay because the white sky days are perfect for photographing flowers.

The soft even light of an overcast day compliments the delicacy of the flowers and there are no shadows and no harsh bright spots, which makes it easier to get a good exposure.

Backlight will make your flowers glow

Another type of light that is excellent for flower photography is backlight. Backlight happens when the sun is directly in front of you lighting your flower from behind. Because flower petals are translucent, backlight makes flowers appear to glow.

Try to capture backlit flowers late in the day when the sun is close to the horizon which will cast nice warm light on the rest of your image too. You might even be able to catch some rays of light filtering through the trees.

Use Fill Light

As a general rule, the best light is going to be in the morning and late afternoon. However, the lighting isn't always going to be perfect. The flowers you want to shoot may be in deep shadows beneath trees or other vegetation or maybe overcast skies just aren't giving you the contrast that you want. In these cases, you may need to add some of your own light to really make your flower images pop. One way that you might be able to accomplish this is by using a

Aesthetic Exposure Triangle ©2011 Michael P. Young

Each side of the triangle represents an "ingredient" in the amount of light contributed to the overall exposure of a given scene. The longer the side of the triangle, the more light contributed. If you increase/decrease the length of one side of the triangle, you must equally decrease/increase, respectively, the length of another side or split the change proportionately between the other two sides.



reflector to direct more light onto the subject. Any type of reflective material could work, such as a white sheet of foam core or even a piece of white poster board. In a pinch, these can be picked up at an office or hobby store, but they aren't going to be the easiest to carry with you in the field and aren't going to last very long before they get wet, ripped, or blown away by the wind.

A 5-in-1 reflector is a relatively inexpensive solution that works great for this type of photography. These reflectors are typically round and have reversible sheet that is black on one side and white on the other, then when turned inside out, is silver on one side and gold on the other. Sandwiched in the middle is a diffusion disc that can be used in many ways as well. Depending on your situation, you can use the gold side to provide warmer light or the silver side for a cooler image. There are lots of uses for this versatile and indispensable tool and it folds up to make it easy to carry with you.

You may find that you need a little more light or that the reflector just isn't reflecting enough light onto the flower that you are shooting. This could be a good time to break out the flash and see what can be created. Just a little kiss of light may be all you need to really make that image sing, so start out with the flash at low power and adjust as necessary.

Use a Diffuser/Deflector

If it is mid-day and you can't put your subject in the shade, use a diffuser.

If your subject is in the shade, you can use a reflector to bounce some light back towards your subject and make the flower more vibrant.

Advanced- Just Add Water

It's such a simple and small thing, but I think it really adds drama and interest. However, if you need to add your own, a small spray bottle will suffice. Just spritz a little bit of water on the flower, and then take your best shot. This water will accomplish three things for you in preparation for some great images. First, the flower may be dusty and the water will clean it off. Secondly, the water will bead up on the flower petals and other flower parts and just makes the image much more interesting. Finally, the flower will glisten as light is reflected off the sheen of water and make it appear more vibrant in your images.

Creative:

@ Creative. THINK (AND SHOOT) OUTSIDE THE SPHERE

It is not necessary to always compose your flower images with the whole flower in the shot. Try something different and more creative. Only show a small part of the flower; perhaps only a petal or part of a petal, the stamen, or some other part of the flower. Abstract images of this nature evoke a sense of mystery and curiosity.

@ Creative. Show some movement

Just because the wind is blowing that field of wildflowers doesn't mean that you have to set up a wind block and attempt to shoot a stationary subject. Try using the wind to your advantage in making a more creative image of the flowers. With the camera set up on a tripod, stop down the aperture to achieve a relatively slow shutter speed. Depending on how strong the wind is blowing and how much light is available, you may even need to use a neutral density filter to slow the shutter speed enough to show movement. Once you have established the camera setting necessary for the shot, make an image and review it on the LCD. Make adjustments, if necessary, to speed up or slow down the shutter speed for the desired result. The shutter should remain open for a second or two as the wind is blowing the flowers. The result will be a more artistic and dynamic image showing the blurring of the flowers as they move to and fro.

You can also move the camera l,r,u,d or in circle. Even more interesting can be zooming the lens during a long exposure.

@ Creative. Have Fun with the sun

Ideally, you will be making images close to sunrise or sunset when the sun is low in the sky and the light is best. Place the flower between the camera and the sun, with just a hint of the sun peeking out from the edge of the flower to create a

starburst effect. This will require the lens aperture to be small, in the neighborhood of f/16 or f/22. Be sure use a tripod and use live view to compose and focus. Do not look directly toward the sun through the viewfinder, as this could damage your eye. Also, take advantage of the beautiful colors in the sky just as the sun is about to rise or right after sunset. Compose the image of the flower to show the setting sun and sky to make a very dramatic image.

@ Creative. Show Flower's Lifecycle

One great way to tell a story with your flower images is to select a flower and show its life cycle with a series of images taken throughout the growing season. Preferably, use a flower in your backyard garden so you will have easy access and won't have to travel anywhere. Start with an initial image showing the flower just as it is planted or beginning to grow. Over time, take an image every few days or a week to illustrate the transformation of the flower as it begins to bloom, fully opens, and eventually dies at the end of its life cycle or when the weather changes.

You can also do as a Time-Lapse movie (best indoors to protect camera and have safe power supply. More rewarding with fast bloomers).

@ Creative. Be an Artist

When you are shooting that flower image, keep in mind the end result and the post-processing potential. One wonderful aspect of photography is that you have the freedom to create not just what you see, but also what you feel in an image. You don't have to follow conventions. That flower may be colorful, but perhaps you would prefer to make the image black and white. You may even choose to selectively color the image (gasp!). Half the fun is post-processing. The raw image is just a starting point, a kind of canvas for your work of art.

@ Creative 10. Focus the primary subject through a 'frame'

Try positioning yourself so that another flower is in front of your main subject and very close to the end of your lens. The secondary flower will become a blur of color and your final image will have a more abstract feel.

The Big Ones/Takeaways for all:

Understand your camera's functions and controls. Read The Manual. Then practice, and find other resources like the Internet (for YOUR camera)

Take your time

Exposure. Exposure Triangle.

ISO- depends on the ambient light or shade

F/stop- affects your Depth of Field

Shutter Speed- important for holding camera steady and keeping subject movement from affecting sharpness

Understand Histogram, and use after first shots at new location, and frequently

Depth of Field. Small f/stop numbers (like f/2.8 or 4) indicate a wide opening of lens and narrow DoF. A large numbered (small opening) f/stop will give greatest DoF for a given distance to the subject. f/stop is a ratio/fraction. Learn f/stop steps to be able to use with exposure planning.

Lighting-

Position of light, intensity, direction

Direct bright sun is usually poor lighting

Shade or use of a modifier is much better

Use reflectors and diffusers (light modifiers)

Flash should be well diffused

Early morning or late in day provides better, more attractive, lighting than midday

Location:

Get the best viewpoint then WORK the subject and look for others (up, down, around)

Watch the background. Take the background with you

Use a Plamp or a windbreak

Think about your composition before putting finger on button

Make a note of the Name of the flower

Make a photograph rather than quickly **taking** a picture

KISS

Some abbreviations:

VAL= Voice Activated Light-stand (or flower stem steadier)

BBC= Big Black Camera (upscale DSLR [Digital Single Lens Reflex] camera)

Plamp- Plant Clamp- Wimberley commercial product name. (About \$45)

... Particularly for those with a BBC:

Use Live View

Digital camera settings for flower photography

To achieve maximum image quality with minimum noise you should set your digital camera to the lowest ISO setting available, usually ISO 100 or 200.

Shoot in RAW format so that the maximum amount of picture information is stored for you to work with later.

Set White Balance to Daylight to enable easy batch editing later.

Use single shot drive mode, rather than continuous.

Use small apertures (like f/16) to maximize detail - at very close range, even the smallest aperture can result in depth of field measured in millimeters.

Use wide apertures (like f/2.8) to emphasize a sharply focused subject against a blurred background (for example stamens in focus, rest of the flower not).

Enhancements...

Water drops: Raindrops with flower within: use Macro lens (or Macro mode), about 10" from the drop with a flower about 10" beyond. Use tripod, focus carefully to ensure flower is in focus within the drop.

Advanced Use a shallow depth of field

Shallow depth of field is when only part of the image is sharp and the rest is soft and out-of-focus. You can achieve this by using a wide aperture (low aperture number) such as f/4 or f/2.8. The effect is even more pronounced if you are using a telephoto lens with a wide aperture.

Advanced Make it sharp

Even if you are using a shallow depth of field, it is essential that at least part of the flower is sharp. Use a tripod, a cable release or your camera's two second timer, and the mirror lock up function for the best results.

Remember that even if there doesn't appear to be much wind, flowers always move. If your flower isn't sharp, try using a faster shutter speed.

Finally, check your focus and if necessary use manual focus to ensure the camera is focused on the most important part of the subject.

Advanced: Camera Motion (BBC): using a wired cable shutter release or wireless trigger will prevent the need to touch the camera to take the picture, possibly causing vibration and camera movement. If you don't have a cable release or wireless trigger, you can also **use your camera's self-timer mode** to accomplish the same thing. Consider setting the timer for two seconds (instead of the default 10 seconds) or each shot will feel like an eternity to make.

Recommended Apps for post-production improvements:

Adobe Photoshop Elements (about \$90)

Adobe Lightroom

Adobe Photoshop you 'subscribe' to both Lightroom and P/S for about \$10/month

Other resources:

CRS Website CTRose.org, Photo Section (several articles on Photo improvement)

Join a camera club or a Meet-up group that specializes in photography. Two in central CT are Shutter-Buds and Mid-Connecticut Photography Meet-up Group Cost \$10-15 per year. Google them or look for their Facebook pages

Email me if questions- David Candler, DevCandler@aol.com