



PLANT AND FLOWER PHOTOGRAPHY

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Plant and flower photography varies considerably according to the end use of the photographs. Those used for lecture purposes or book illustrations are precise in their style and needs while the artistic style of work has no real boundaries.

Let's look at these very different types of photographs:

1. The recording of the plant or flower so that it is easily recognisable and in a manner. This shows something of the identifying or typical features of that plant so that the subject can be named accordingly – an illustrative style.

2. There is a creative style, which emphasises perhaps colours, texture or design but doesn't always identify the type of plant or flower – but is fun to work with.

The recording of the plant or flower

The choice of a good specimen of typical growth habit is important and one that is clear of other plants is easier to work with.

Check that the light is falling on the chosen one and from the right angle to highlight the important parts. Angled light can enhance features such as hairy foliage, shiny textures, veining or an undulating leaf surface.

Flowers are often delicate with a creped or crinkled surface, and others show luminosity in the petals which can also be enhanced by the light from the right angle.

A good photographer has to become extremely conscious of light and the angle it comes from, as this is what makes or mars your photograph. "Seeing the light" is a great aid to photography and not just a joke.

Now that most of us are using digital cameras which don't need the brilliance of light that film demanded, it is usually better for close-ups of flowers to photograph them in soft lighting conditions, although the direction of the light can still cast shadows in certain areas to give depth and detail to your subject. A flower with layers of petals needs suitable lighting to lift the petals one from the other.

A flash on the camera or sunlight from directly behind the camera give very flat lighting and doesn't help separate petals or leaves. In nature photography, flash from a very low angle never looks natural.

In harsh sunlight it has been traditional to use a reflector of white card or crumpled foil to help fill in dark shadows that can appear very black in the end result, but if a shadow can be cast over the subject, often one's body shadow, digital cameras will handle the lower lighting condition without the need for a reflector. This is useful on the mountainside.

Have a good look at the background behind your plant or flower. It is almost as important as the subject. Light coloured objects, particularly man-made ones, and even bits of straw or dried branches pick up a lot of light and are disturbing in the background.

If using a camera other than a fully automatic one, a decision can be made as to whether a maximum depth of field is required or not, and the camera set accordingly. The depth of field is the area of sharp focus in your subject - whether it is sharp from front to back, or in a flower close-up, that all petals and stamens, from the nearest edge to the far side of the flower, are all sharp. If you have a choice, you might decide that some subjects look better with the background thrown out of focus and in that case you would use a wide F-stop such as F4.

With our digital cameras we are getting a greater depth of field than with film and since we're not paying dearly for each exposure it is wise to try more than one setting as too much detail in the background can detract from your subject.

Alternatively, when a great depth of sharp focus is needed, a small F-stop such as F16 should be used, then a tripod should be used to eliminate camera shake, because of the slower shutter speed now required.

These options are not available with the 'point and shoot' cameras, which operate automatically and fire off the flash if the lighting is inadequate. However, automatic cameras, some with close-up modes, can still take very good photographs if care is taken in the selection of plant material, thought given to the angle of light and the camera position in relation to the subject.

Wind movement is an annoying factor in plant and flower photography, particularly when using a slower shutter speed - slower than 1/60 second is dangerous as movement can result in blurred photos. Patience is necessary on windy days. Flash can reduce this problem but often-unwanted highlights show up in flash photography.

Photographing plants is like photographing small children in some ways. Photos of children aren't good unless you get down to their level. With plants it is important to get the correct camera angle too. Looking directly down from a high angle seldom does not work for the more serious plant recording, nor does one from near ground level looking up. Save those angles for your creative flower and plant photography.

Creative Style

Amazing shots of textures, patterns and colours are available within the plant world to the creative eye. Areas of sharp or soft focus can be altered at will by using single lens reflex cameras.

In this type of photography the author doesn't need to produce a faithful rendition of any one plant or flower and doesn't even need to name the plant material. It can be shot indoors or outdoors, with natural or artificial lighting, with creative lenses and attachments and artificial accompaniments.

There is an exciting world of plant material out there awaiting the creative mind with a camera at hand and time to experiment. Have a go and revel in this visual wonderland.

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