

How to Photograph Flowers

Moving from Snapshots to Photographs

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www.canadiannaturephotographer.com/photographingflowers.html (download notes and slides)



I believe we are attracted to flowers because of their beautiful colours and sensuous shapes. Flowers are colourful because they need to attract pollinators like insects and humming birds which in turn feed on their nectar and pollinate the flowers. New photographers are also often attracted to flower photography but soon discover that taking great pictures of flowers can be challenging. While the flowers won't run away, they bend and move in the wind and the closer you get with your camera the more evident any kind of movement becomes. Most serious or professional photographers will use digital SLR (single lens reflex) cameras with a macro lens and a tripod either in the field or in a studio to take flower photographs. Digital compact cameras however have one advantage, most of them permit the photographer to get close without requiring a special macro lens - the cameras simply need to be set to macro mode. This short article will feature some ideas, tips and suggestions on how to take better pictures of flowers with the emphasis on garden flowers. This article will discuss 1) Composition 2) Lighting 3) Exposure and 4) Ideas for creative flower photography.

1. Composition

Composition refers to the placement of elements in a photograph or artwork. Good composition occurs when all the elements within the picture provide a sense of unity or sense of belonging where each picture element supports the main subject. To achieve this we must organize the elements so the picture appears as a whole and anything that does not belong in the picture is eliminated. Many new photographers tend to include too much in their images. By removing elements and simplifying the image anyone can make their flower compositions more effective.

Most photographers use cameras that have a rectangular frame with proportions of 3:2 or 4:3 with a few photographers using a square picture frame. As a result most photographs taken are usually in the horizontal format. One simple way to take more interesting photographs of flowers is to include vertical compositions. Consider shooting both horizontal and vertical pictures for maximum flexibility

Provide a sense of Unity or belonging in your picture through Dominance

After deciding whether to shoot vertically or horizontally, you need to decide what the main element in your picture should be and what other elements to include. Eliminate anything from the picture that does not support the main element. Check that there are no distracting elements or bright spots in the background. Check that nothing is creeping into the side of the frame that might distract a viewer. As for placing the flower in the frame this will vary - sometimes the center is the best place, sometimes slightly off to one side. The rule of thirds (see my web article on composition) which is often useful for landscapes, portraits and wildlife photography often doesn't work well with flowers in my experience. Instead I would like to suggest some alternative ideas for flower composition based on dominance and subordination. The dominant element is simply the one that a viewer is likely to see first, then they will explore the subordinate elements which should support or in some way make the dominant element more interesting to the viewer and in this regard provides unity where all the elements have a sense of belonging.

Dominance in a photograph can be achieved by making the main element stand out or be more noticeable. This can be achieved by:

- 1) Size - make the dominant element the largest element in the picture with other supporting elements smaller.
- 2) The most dominant element can simply be the most colourful element in a picture.
- 3) Another way to achieve dominance is to arrange the elements so the most important element is in focus while other elements are out of focus i.e. using selective focus.
- 4) Another way to make an element dominant is to find one that is similar but different in colour from all the other elements - this suggests uniqueness.

2) Lighting

After composition, good light is an essential element in flower photography. Generally bright sunlight is not suitable for flower photography though there are exceptions. Bright sunlight usually results in dark blocked up shadows and hot spots or bright areas in the image that are distracting and unattractive. Most flowers will look their best in soft diffused light that occurs in the shade or can be created artificially with an umbrella or diffusion reflector. In some instances the use of a flash can make the colours of a flower appear more saturated when the background becomes black as the light falls off rapidly behind the flower. Back light and side light can also enhance the shape of a flower and light up the leaves and petals.

Using a Flash can often make for a sharper picture as it will help stop movement of the flower caused by wind. If there is nothing behind the flower and you are parallel to the ground the flash will often result in a black background as the light falls off. With flash you may need to adjust your exposure compensation so the flower is not over exposed as the camera may see a large black background if the flower is small. Bottom line is experiment with flash and adjust the exposure until the flower is properly exposed.

White balance refers to the colour of light or how blue or yellow it is. If you are shooting .JPG files your white balance setting is important. Either set your camera white balance to Auto or select the setting to match the kind of light under which you are photographing. For example shade tends to have a blue cast so set your camera to the shade setting. Shooting under artificial light or flash also alters the colour of the light.

3. Exposure

Photographic exposure is determined by a combination of your camera's ISO speed, F-stop and shutter speed used. On many compact cameras you may not have the ability to alter F-stop or Shutter speed directly. On SLR cameras you can control these items and it's the main reason more serious photographers choose an SLR camera. Correct exposure is one where the photograph shows the maximum detail and offers the most flattering view of your flower. In terms of the picture it represents how light or dark the subject is. Some photographers may prefer the picture being slightly lighter or darker and you need to understand that while a bad exposure is obviously too dark or too light, the perfect exposure will be different for different photographers. No matter what type of digital camera you use, evaluating exposure outside in bright sunlight by viewing the liquid crystal display (LCD) monitor can be difficult. For this reason most cameras offer the ability to preview or see a histogram of the picture. The histogram has two axis. The bottom or X-axis represents tonal values that vary from pure black on the left to pure white on the right with intermediate tones in between. The Y-axis or height of the histogram represents the number of pixels in the image that have a particular tone. In an ideal exposure most of the pixels fall within the two ends of the X-axis with no peaks at either the black (left) or white (right) side. When pixels bunch up on the right or left this indicates that the image is either over or under exposed and information is missing or being clipped. Images with pixels piled up on the right side mean that parts of the image are overexposed and this is the worse thing a digital photographer can do to an image. If this occurs you should override the camera's exposure to shift the exposure more to the left (darker) using your camera's exposure compensation button. If your camera has different types of light metering, most of the time leave it in auto mode. On Nikon they call it matrix and on Canon evaluative mode. Adjust the histogram so you there is a minimum of clipping on the right or left of the histogram.

Shooting with Compact Digital Cameras

1. Set camera to macro mode and move in close to the flower
2. Set your camera to auto white balance or set it to match the type of light you have
3. Hold your camera steady, use a tripod, support, bean bag and protect the flower from wind
4. Find flowers in the shade or create shade around the flower for more even lighting
5. Watch your backgrounds - search for dark uncluttered backgrounds
6. If your image is too light modify the exposure compensation and darken the image
7. Take many photos, delete those that are not sharp or properly exposed, select only the best
8. To improve an image you can edit, crop, and modify it using a computer and software like Picasa (free from google), GIMP (free), Photoshop etc.

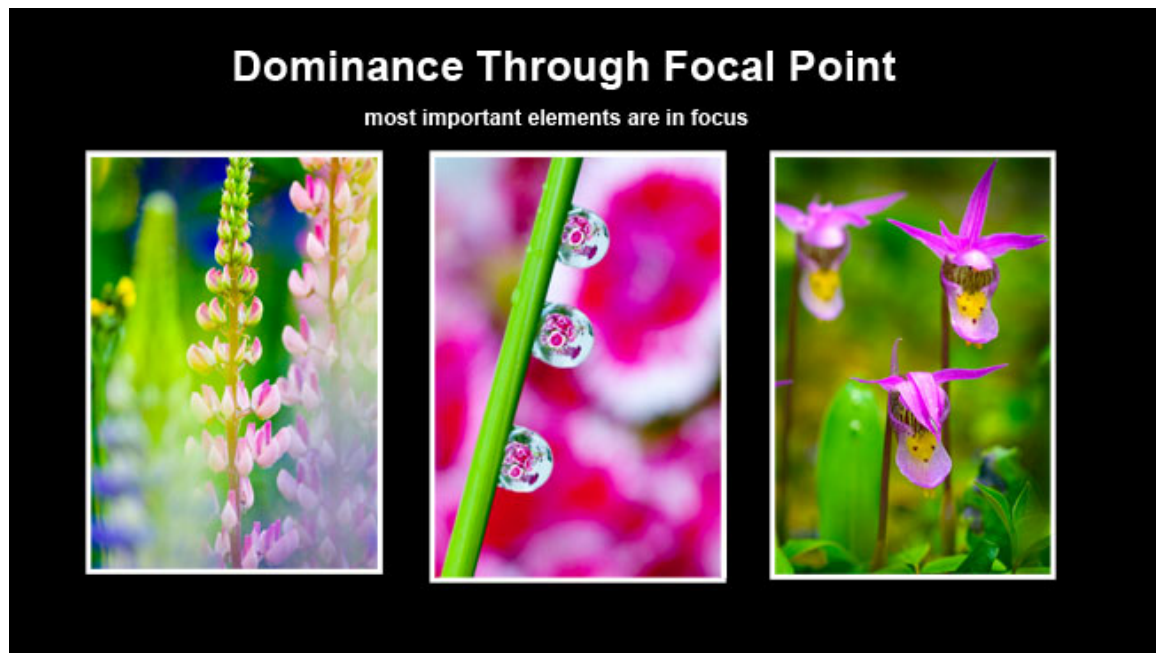
4. Ideas for Creative Flower Photography

If you are not a photoshop user you can control the saturation of your pictures and take black and white or sepia toned images with some cameras by modifying the settings in your camera menu. If you do use photoshop, I recommend that you always shoot in colour and for maximum flexibility shoot RAW files and then modify your images later in post processing.

To create soft out of focus blurs, use the telephoto setting on your camera and position your camera close to other flowers and shoot through them. You can even have the flowers touch the front of the lens - experiment.

Another interesting technique is to create water droplets on a branch, pine needle or flower stem and then get really close so the water droplets act like small lenses. In practice the water droplets need to be the right distance from the background and you need to be in pretty tight or close. When you are in this close the slightest breeze or movement can cause the flower to go out of focus - but it can result in some spectacular photos. Use an eye dropper to place water drops on plant stems or grass and hold them in place in front of the flower. I use a tripod to hold them in front of the flowers and I use a tripod to hold my camera steady.

Finally my last recommendation for more interesting flower photos is simply to get close, get really close. The insides of flowers can appear like volcanoes exploding with the multicoloured stamens and pistil. The good news is that you can find flowers though out the summer and many botanical gardens or greenhouses all year long. It's a great way to play with your camera and if you get more adventurous you can begin to hunt for and photograph wild flowers.



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