

Flower Photography: Art and Techniques

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Many dedicated wildlife photographers disparage flower photography because they assume (quite erroneously) that flowers are an easy option since they don't run away. In reality, I would argue you have to work hard to make flowers look exciting by the way you light and frame them.

Each kind of flower offers a small window of opportunity when it is in peak condition. If this window is missed, it invariably means waiting another whole year. Timing therefore is crucial. For me, part of the delight of flower photography is the time spent searching for the best specimens. Once found, the optimum camera angle then has to be sought.

Where to find flowers

Even though the prime time for taking flowers in the field in temperate latitudes is in spring and summer, if you are prepared to travel there is no month in the year when you cannot find wildflowers in bloom. For years I have kept a multi-year diary noting when I first see each kind of flower blooming in the wild in Britain. In this way I can compare the timing with past years. As our winters become milder, so the spring flowers are opening earlier.

Planning and preparation

Even if I intend to travel a short distance from my home, I never just get in a car and drive. The first thing I do is to check out the weather forecast the night before. Then, I may call a naturalist or ranger who knows the location and is likely to confirm my main target is in flower.

If I am planning to do alpine flowers in a new location I will always check to see if there is a cable car or ski lift to gain a speedy ascent.

Many US states have wildflower hotlines which are regularly updated. These are invaluable for determining things like whether rain has fallen at the right time to produce a landmark year for the desert annuals in California or Arizona. Once in the area, you can then find out the best routes to take. I did this years ago before making a trip to Texas in what turned out to be a landmark year. Tip: use Google to search for "*wildflowers hotline*" and add whatever state you want.

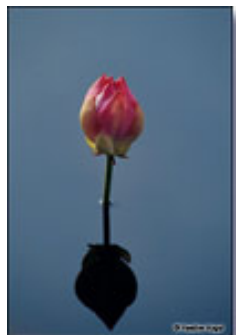
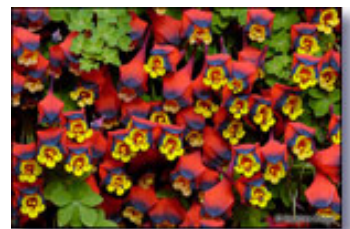
To gain a bit more height I stash a small set of steps in my 4WD vehicle. This has the added advantage of leaving a much smaller footprint than my own, so that when working in a field of flowers I am not trampling them underfoot.

However much I plan ahead, there are always those unexpected finds. It is a real bonus when I round a corner to see a sheet of colour before me or when I find a gem of a flower growing in a perfect setting.

Equipment

A tripod that can be used at eye level one moment and ground level the next is essential. It is no secret that I have used the British-made Benbo for several decades; but I now use a carbon fiber Gitzo without a center column so the legs can be flattened onto the ground. A tripod allows not only a slower shutter speed to be used than when hand holding a camera (although the new VR and IS lenses help a lot here) but also a critical appraisal of the composition by means of fine adjustment.

Reflectors and diffusers are carried on my Photopack using a carabiner, while a flash with an extension lead is carried in a bum bag.



With the size of flowers ranging from a few millimetres across to the 2-metre high [Titan Arum](#) there is no single lens which is perfect for every flower in every situation; although if concentrating on close-ups a macro lens is ideal. I use every lens I have to photograph flowers - from the 12-24mm Nikkor zoom to the 500mm f4, but not all on one day or in a single location. If I know I am going to photograph magnolia, or baobab flowers blooming high up on large trees; or water lilies way out in a lake with no boat available I will be sure to pack a 500mm or my favourite 200-400mm Nikkor zoom; whereas if I am climbing mountains, a 12-24mm and a 105mm macro lens are my first choices, carried in a small photo pack.

Composition

It is all too easy to fall into the trap of adopting an approach which you know works; but in reality every situation should be appraised so that the flowers can be shown to their best advantage.

Even though I have been shooting 100% digital for two years now, I still adopt the mantra 'compose in rather than out of the camera'. This is not to say that I never crop on a screen, but this may be to woo a client who specifically asks for a certain format and it is surprising how many times this has worked when I did not shoot it that way originally.

Try to vary the pace by mixing the formats (vertical, horizontal, square, and panoramic) as well as the focal length of the lenses. For some subjects - such as tall flower spikes - the choice of format is obvious; but even so I will work a location every way I can until I have exhausted it. If you have time to spare in a floriferous field of bluebonnets or poppies, I would suggest you set yourself the task of taking the flowers in at least ten different ways. You may think this is a daunting task, but it is an excellent way to stretch your vision for seeing different compositions.

If using autofocus, vary the focus spot to avoid always placing the subject in the center of the frame. Approaches to flower photography vary from minimal focus to maximum depth of field; from the whole flower contained within the frame to a crop that chops off part of the flower. The choice is yours and what you want to do with the final shots. With images used for ID shots you have little scope for anything other than a pure record.

Artistic approach

If, on the other hand, you want to produce fine art prints, then anything goes and you can make or break your own rules, but you do need to remember photography then becomes much more subjective - what you like may not appeal to everyone.

Larger blooms can be taken with a more ethereal approach using minimal depth of field. This is not a lazy way of working, simply a different one. You still have to see and compose the picture.

Taking multiple exposures on a single frame and making slight adjustments to the framing can produce an Impressionist effect, but this only works with bold blocks of colour. I always use a tripod. On a windy day, I set up the camera and allow the wind to move the flower(s); with static subjects I make slight adjustments to the camera position.

As I look back, I can recall some memorable sightings of flowers - from floriferous ditches in Texas, unbelievable riches in Namaqualand, to a pony trek in Kashmir some 30 years ago. Here I quickly learnt to pull up my pony beyond a choice clump of alpiners; otherwise by the time I have dismounted the pony had begun to browse on them!

Flower photography should always be fun, and by stretching your imagination and being creative you may come away with some novel compositions.



1. Research a location before venturing out.
2. Spend time selecting prime specimens.
3. Use a tripod to gain a slower shutter speed in poor light and to fine-tune the composition.
4. Choose a low viewpoint to isolate tall spikes against a blue sky.
5. Use an overhead viewpoint for cushion formers that hug the ground.
6. Use a wide angle lens to include both foreground flowers and their natural habitat behind.
7. Use a long lens to gain more impact for flowers high up on trees or growing far out in water.
8. Appraise the background with the depth of field preview.
9. Try both landscape and portrait formats for the same subject.
10. Remember less can be more.

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Heather Angel started her working life as a marine biologist but gradually photography took over. She travels extensively in search of flowers and wildlife. In addition to managing the specialist image collection - Natural Visions - which has over 50 contributing photographers, she is a prolific writer with more than 50 books (her latest is a monograph on *Puffins* and *How to Photograph Flowers* is still in print) and countless articles to her name. Always an enthusiastic communicator, Heather tutors workshops all over the world.

The British Council in Delhi commissioned Heather to document the biodiversity of the Himalayas - in one month! Her exhibition, *Natural Visions*, toured Britain from 2000 - 2004 and was also on show in Kuala Lumpur, Cairo, and Beijing. Currently she is spending a lot of time in China photographing the endemic plants and wildlife for a book about China's wilderness areas.

www.naturalvisions.co.uk - main website

www.heatherangel.co.uk - Heather's personal website



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