

Within Walking Distance

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Photo 1



Photo 2



Photo 3



Photo 4



Photo 5



Photo 6

Southern Indiana was a wonderful place to grow up. The Ohio River Valley near New Albany has some of the most beautiful hardwood forested hills in the state, dotted with small farms, derelict implements, painted churches and small quarries. But, the best thing about Indiana was that it was a long way from Oregon where my grandparents lived. Almost every summer we would travel by train to visit them in Eugene or Yachats. Those treks across the vast expanses of the west on the Union Pacific, Great Northern, and Northern Pacific gave me my first taste of the Great Plains, Rocky Mountains, and the Columbia Gorge. That last morning dash toward Portland through the gorge was memorable for the train race of the Union Pacific's City of Portland rolling down the Oregon side and the Great Northern's Empire Builder hurrying down the Washington shore.

Summers in Oregon were spectacular. My grandfather owned sawmills in the Cascades east of Eugene and a house on the beach at Yachats. For me there was nothing better than exploring the tide pools and watching the daily show of waves crashing on the headlands. A love for the beauty of the land grew easily within.

With all of my memories of the spectacular scenery of the Mountain West and Pacific coast, my first love in photography was and continues to be the grand landscape. Images by Marc Adamus, Guy Tal, Tony Kuyper and a host of other NPN members regularly take my breath away. I so appreciate their familiarity and intimacy with their subjects and envy their ability to visit and revisit beautiful locales in search of the best compositions and light.

Unfortunately for me, at least from a photography perspective, I've lived the last 23 years in southeast Texas, not an area noted for inspiring landscapes. With the exception of the four to six week spring wildflower season I have to spend long hours in the car to get to places like Big Bend and the Guadalupe Mountains. Trips to the mountains of Colorado, Wyoming and California are much anticipated vacations for me but once there I have to shoot what light there is and hope for good conditions. If I miss a shot I don't have the option to return soon to rectify it - an especially aggravating situation when I was shooting film and couldn't know what was on the slides until returning to home territory.

But, weep no tears for me. Thanks to my wife Christine, who has one of the greenest thumbs on the planet, and my own eye for small details I have an endless supply of material within walking distance of my house. Some of my best images have been captured less than 100 feet from my front door. I've become a flora and macro shooter by accident and/or necessity and love every minute of it.

Success close to home isn't just a matter of walking out the door and pointing the camera at a flower or bug. All the rules of composition and light apply and it is attention to those details that render good images. I keep track of sunrise and sunset times and directions. Through the course of the year I know what angle the sun will strike certain parts of the garden and which flowers will be complemented by dawn light and which will need overcast. I observe the plants carefully to monitor the progress of buds and try to shoot when the blooms are optimal.

I pay attention to the background and do most of my shooting with a 200mm macro



Photo 14



Photo 15



Photo 16



Photo 17



Photo 18



Photo 19



Photo 20



Photo 7



Photo 8



Photo 9



Photo 10



Photo 11



Photo 12



Photo 13

lens because of its long working distance and relatively narrow angle of view. I'll often use 1.4x and 2x teleconverters to really get up close and personal and will stick extension tubes on my 300mm f2.8 if I want more reach and narrower view angle yet. One great thing about shooting close to home is that all of my gear is only a few steps away so no matter what tool I need for the job it will be close at hand. One for instance is my macro rail which I hardly ever carry in my camera bag but have at my disposal when I'm in the garden.

What you have in the garden is important as well. Chrissy and I both love butterflies so when we moved into our current home four years ago we decided to try butterfly gardening. Our first attempt was with milkweed and parsley and no sooner were the plants in the ground than the Monarchs and Black Swallowtails found them. What a blessing it was to watch the entire life cycle from egg to caterpillar to chrysalis to butterfly. Of course I was only too happy to photograph every stage. (Photos 14,15,16) In addition to the milkweed and parsley we also maintain bronze fennel, pipe vines, and citrus trees to attract various swallowtails and passion vines for gulf fritillaries. (Photo 17) We keep a lot of nectar plants including pentas, milkweed, lantana, verbena, butterfly bush, cone flowers and zinnias. Decorative flowers include daylilies, calla lilies, snapdragons, amaryllis, bluebonnets, gerbera daisies, gaillardia, asters, hibiscus, black eyed susans, tulips and gladiolas.

As with all photography, quality of light is paramount. Photo 1 of a pink daylily was taken at first light before the entire disc of the sun had broken the horizon. Photo 2 was taken shortly after dawn with side/backlighting on the hibiscus while using a featureless sky as background that blew out completely to produce a bit of a studio look. Photo 3 was another early morning image with low sidelight illuminating the flower and drops. Photos 4 and 5 utilized backlighting to produce the glow in the petals. Photo 6 was taken in full sun to get the sparkle of the sun in the drop. Photos 7 and 8 were shot in high thin overcast producing bright petals but no overpowering shadows. Photo 9 utilized full overcast to bring out the color gradations.

Serendipity also plays a part. I was set up to shoot the calla lily of Photo 10 when the small hoverfly landed at just the right place. Photo 11 happened when I came out of the air conditioned house into a typical 98% humidity Houston morning and my front lens element kept fogging. After fighting it for a minute or two I eventually looked through the viewfinder and rather liked what I saw.

Perhaps the crowning achievement of observation and luck is Photo 12. While investigating the garden one morning I spotted this spider web with a fairly shabby milkweed flower behind it. The distance between web and flower was much too great to get both sharp in the same frame and wind movement dictated a shallow DOF/fast shutter speed. I shot the web and flower separately and then a third exposure at a point somewhere in between for a color glow, combined the images in Photoshop and ended up with the 2006 Photo Art image of the year. And then there are images that are just plain fun, such as the "cable pirate" in Photo 13 and the patriotic monarch in Photo 18.

Familiarity with my subjects and digital capture have made it easy to experiment with different compositions, arrangements and techniques and to search for hidden details. (Photos 19-23)

Participating in NPN is a source of inspiration and ideas. Leann Greene's 2006 macro image of the year, Nathan Buck's shallow DOF images and Mike Moats' leaf studies made me want to try some of their ideas. (Photos 24-27) I even get the occasional avian opportunity. (Photos 28, 29)

I've attempted to show how many imaging possibilities there are in a typical suburban setting. My images may not have the visual power of some of the grand landscapes but they have a beauty of their own and because they're taken close to home they're easy to refine and adjust. For me, familiarity breeds content rather than contempt. May you find your own photo paradise close to home as well.



Photo 21



Photo 22



Photo 23



Photo 24



Photo 25



Photo 26



Photo 27

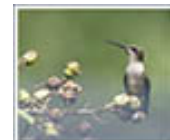


Photo 28



Photo 29

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Comments on NPN flora photography articles? Send them to the [editor](#).

Bill Fach is a practicing optometrist in a surgical eye clinic in Northwest Houston, Texas. He is also a lay minister and Bible teacher in the Texas Department of Corrections. Bill and his wife Christine have four grown sons, six grandchildren, and two cats. He enjoys shooting things that don't talk back, especially landscapes, flora and macro subjects. More of his work can be seen on his website at <http://www.sdgimages.com>.



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