

Improve your flower photography

Now (or whenever Spring starts) is the time to improve your flower photos. Spring and summer offer huge potential to shoot stunning plant and flower portraits. Whether it's in your garden, a public park or even on the side of the road, there are plenty of fantastic photos for the taking. In this guide there are 25 top flower photography tips for you. Use them, and watch your photography, erm... blossom. Sorry.

1 Macro lenses

If you're interested in close-up flower photography then you should invest in a macro lens. Using a macro lens enables you to focus up close so you can really fill the frame with your subject. A true macro lens produces an image recorded on the sensor at life-size or larger. Great care has to be taken when focusing macro lenses as depth of field is very limited when you're so close to your subject. Without a macro lens, check how close you can get to your flower and keep it sharp - it may make you feel the macro lens isn't quite so vital - for now.

2 Extension tubes

If you want to try close-up photography without the expense of a macro lens, then extension tubes are a good alternative. Three tubes of varying depth form a set of extension tubes. A tube or combination of tubes is fitted between the camera body and the lens. Moving the lens away from the sensor reduces the minimum focusing distance to allow close-up photography. You'll probably find you need some help and advice from Henry's or Camera Kingston for this - buying online can be confusing.

3 Use a tripod

A good tripod is worth its weight in gold when photographing flowers - so pick the heaviest! Using a tripod slows you down and helps you think clearly about what you're trying to achieve. You can fine-tune composition using a tripod and keep the point of focus exactly where you want it. The ideal type is a sturdy tripod with legs that can splay out so you can photograph close to the ground.

4 Remote release

In order to produce flower pictures that are pin-sharp you need to reduce the risk of camera-shake. With your camera mounted on a tripod you should then attach a cable release. This enables you to fire the shutter without risking camera movement as a result of you pressing down on the shutter release button.

5 Go telephoto

In order to isolate a particular flower from its surroundings you should use a telephoto lens. A long lens when used with the camera set to a wide aperture can really throw the foreground and background out of focus so that the viewer's attention is held where you want it. This is a great technique if you want to produce impressive photographs of individual plants.

6 Wide-angle lenses have their place

If you'd like to show an individual plant or a group of plants in their surroundings, then a wide-angle lens is the tool for the job. Using one enables you to include the plants'

environment in a photograph so there's more information available for the viewer. Depth of field is also increased, so your image can be sharp all the way from the foreground to the background. While not so good for individual flowers, a wide-angle would be just the job for whole garden areas - though you may then decide that a good stepladder is also useful.

7 Switch off auto-focus

Depth of field is so narrow in close-up photography that precise focusing is critical, even with small apertures. To ensure your shots are sharp where you want, try switching to manual focus and doing it yourself. Changing focus alters the magnification of the subject, so set that first, then gently nudge the camera backwards and forwards to position the sweet spot of sharpness where you want it.

8 Use Live View

When shooting close-ups with a macro lens, even at narrow apertures, you need to get your focusing spot on, as your depth of field is so limited that any slight inaccuracy will result in blurred shots. One way round this is to use Live View (if your camera has it) to focus in manually as accurately as possible - use Live View's zoom facility and then, as above, move your camera back or forth by a few millimetres until the element that you want to be in focus is pin-sharp.

9 Shoot in manual

If you'd rather take control than let your camera decide everything for you, then shoot in manual mode. Shooting in manual enables you to choose the aperture and shutter combination that will give you the result you want. Checking your histograms will show you if you need to change a setting in order to produce a correctly exposed image. Bright flowers can fool your camera into underexposing, so shooting in manual and checking histograms can overcome this.

10 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 - if you're not frightened by it - 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 (though this doesn't really matter if you're shooting Raw).
- Use single shot drive mode, rather than continuous.
- Use small apertures to maximise detail - at very close range, even the smallest aperture can result in depth of field measured in millimetres. It will slow your shutter speed down - but you've got your tripod, right?
- Use wide apertures to emphasise a sharply focused subject against a blurred background.

11 Watch the weather

A forecast of wall-to-wall sunshine and cloudless blue skies isn't ideal for flower photography. Direct sunlight can be harsh and unforgiving, resulting in images with too much contrast, burnt-out highlights and loss of detail in shadow areas. A bright but overcast day can be perfect - the light's soft and diffuse and it's much more flattering. Early morning and late afternoon can add even more warmth, with gentle side-lighting.

12 Use a reflector

A reflector is a cheap item of equipment but it can really help to boost your flower photographs to the next level. When positioned close to an individual plant it can be angled so that it directs light into shadow areas to reveal detail and to reduce contrast. It can also be used to shade plants from harsh, direct sunlight if it isn't overcast and, as a bonus, it can work as a wind-break!

13 Flash flower photography

Used in moderation, flash can help you produce impressive images, but be careful not to overdo it. An off-camera flash can be used to provide a subtle burst of side-lighting (to model your subject), or back lighting (to provide a rim-light). Macro ring-flashes are ideal for flower photography, as they produce an even and flattering light, eliminating the harsh shadows that are characteristic of standard flash units. Macro ring-flashes are also ideal for picking out reflective details, such as grains of pollen or raindrops.

14 Take your time

When you first encounter a beautiful park or garden it can be quite daunting and difficult to know where to start. Try to be methodical in your approach - you're more likely to produce impressive photos. Don't start taking photos as soon as you arrive unless you know where to go to get the best shots. Have a walk round and explore your surroundings. Keeping your camera away will help in the long run!

15 Make a note of the name

Flowers and plants in formal gardens are often accompanied by a stick, which bears both their common and/or Latin names. If you want your images used in books or magazines these details are vital. It can be easy to think you'll remember it but after a few more photos or a few days you'll forget. It only takes a minute to write it down. In a few years you could build up a library of images, with their Latin names - which is how the world looks for flowers online.

16 Choose the best viewpoint

Portraits of people and animals often look more impressive when they've been taken from eye-level to the subject. The same can be applied to flower photography to great effect. You're going to have to get low down quite often, so a waterproof sheet to lie on is a useful piece of kit. (For a similar reason, you may like to use an insect repellent, to keep spiders and ants away).

17 Kneesy does it

Because shooting flowers outdoors involves spending a lot of time on your knees and elbows, a gardener's mat becomes an essential piece of kit. If you plan on spending a lot of time taking flower pictures, it will pay for itself in no time.

18 Watch your backgrounds

The background that you choose to photograph a flower against can either make or break the final image. A plant photographed with a soft, uncluttered background can stand out; a distracting, messy background can easily ruin what could have been a great shot if you'd thought a bit more.

19 Behind the scenes

If you can't isolate a plant from background clutter, an easy solution is to place a sheet of card behind your subject: white will give it a botanical, scientific feel, while coloured sheets can be used to complement its colours.

20 Gardening tools

When photographing plants, you need to remove distractions to improve the final shot, but you won't be very popular if you start breaking plant stems or pulling flowers up. Clothes pegs or twine can be used to hold plants out of a shot without damaging them. Tweezers can also be useful for removing small, distracting items from your subject or the background.

21 Composing flower photos

Placing the subject slap-bang in the middle of the frame rarely works well and can result in a flat, boring image. Composing with the subject off-centre can instantly give your images a professional look. Many beginners to flower photography tend to compose shots horizontally. This may be because it's easier to hold and use the camera when held this way rather than turning it on its side to produce a vertical composition. However, more vertical images are used in magazines and books than horizontal ones so you should make the effort to shoot both formats if you'd like to see your efforts published!

You may be able to tell just by looking at your subject which composition will work best. As a rough guide, plants that are wider than they are tall will work as horizontal shots and those that are taller than they are wide will work as vertical shots. This is a rough guide - keep looking through the viewfinder as you move the camera to find the best shot.

22 Plant portraits

Consider cropping right in on a plant to isolate details. Don't take a picture of a whole flower bed and then crop later down to a single bloom. Look for colour and detail and what it is that makes each subject unique: only by focusing on a plant's character - the sweep of a leaf, say, or the point of a petal - you'll be able to create an image that's more of a portrait of the plant than a standard shot.

23 Be wary of wind

A strong wind can be the flower photographer's worst enemy. Even a gentle breeze can cause long-stemmed plants to bob about, resulting in blurred images that are no use to anyone. You can use a strong wind to your advantage and record the movements of flowers and leaves to produce an artistic image but, generally, it's best to venture out when it's calm. Early mornings are usually better - and try using a clamp on long-stemmed plants to steady them between gusts.

24 Move indoors

If you don't have the luxury of being able to wait for a bright, overcast day with no wind, then you can always photograph indoors. Shooting indoors enables you to really concentrate on photography without worrying about your subject moving.

25 Just add water

It's possible to recreate the look of a dew-covered flower by careful use of a water spray.

Adding a few drops of water can really help to bring your flower photographs to life.