

Metal to the Petal

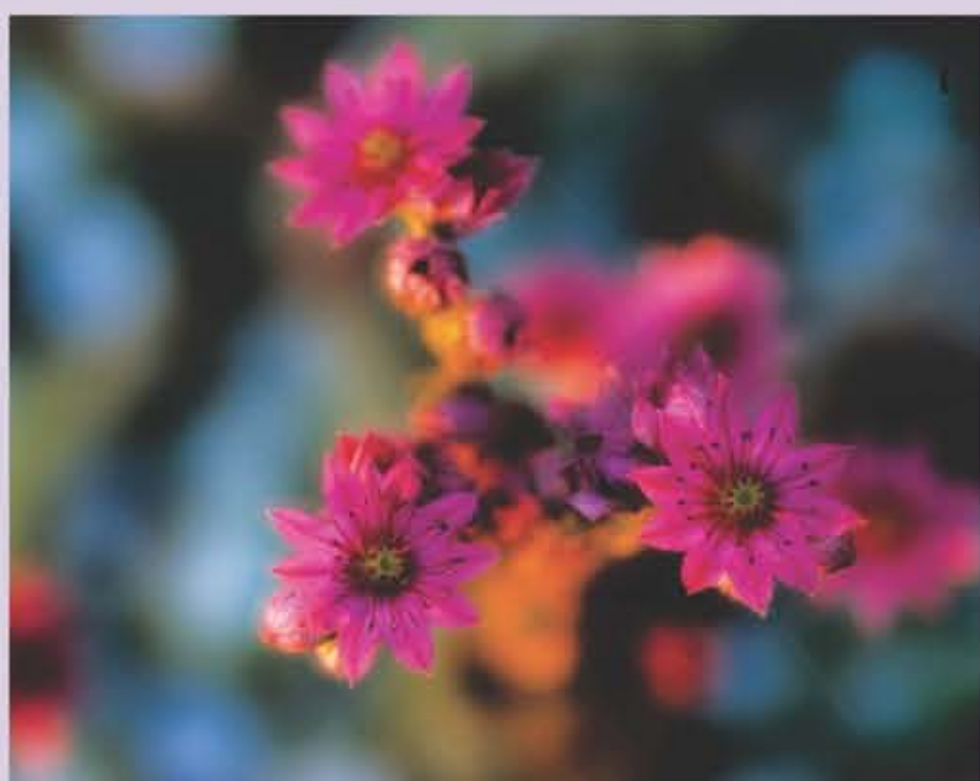
SPECIAL FEATURE

The hardware in your camera bag is not enough when shooting flowers; even though they're beautiful by themselves, flowers, says Tilak Hettige, need a lot of care and preparation if we are to produce good photographs

Text and photos
by TILAK HETTIGE

If you really want to be a professional flower photographer, or even an expert amateur flower photographer, you need to understand flowers and flower arrangement the way a car photographer understands cars and a

food photographer understands food styling. There is no middle ground. You're either deep into the subject or just an observer. So first you understand your subject, after which you become familiar with the tools and means to photograph it properly, which I will now discuss.



1 Networks

Dealing with rain, dewdrops, and wind is part of outdoor photography. There is commercial gear available that you can use as wind shield but I don't use them, preferring natural ambience to create additional drama in my photographs. It makes the photograph more effective. Use common sense before spending money on additional equipment. For example, if you are shooting on a windy mountaintop, go to the leeward side of the hill, away from the wind.



2 Rise early

I prefer early morning shots. Flowers are fresher and are full of moisture, and the light is muted and less harsh. Don't forget the cobwebs dripping dew drops which you can position in the background. I like to cover my lenses with shower caps to keep water droplets away from the lens. When you shoot cobwebs, shoot with the lens wide open and into the sun to get more drama. Try several shots, some keeping the nearest flowers out of focus and others in focus. Pick complementary colors that enhance your main flowers. The closest, out-of-focus flowers will add only their colors not their details thereby adding drama to the photograph. The same technique of keeping some in focus and others out of focus can be used for the background as well. This is called subjective focusing.



3 Creative exposure

is another technique that I adopt. Use the desired aperture that will enhance your subject. There is no need to have very sharp photographs all the time. It may better, with some types of subjects, to project movement in our still photographs. Here are ways by which we can take away the stiffness out of our photographs. Look for slanted stems rather than upright stiff flowers. This brings transition or movement into the photograph in a subtle way. Always try to look at flowers from a different angle — from above or from ground level looking up. Most of my flower photographs were taken from a kneeling position. If you buy a pair of knee pads from a sports shop and wear them under your pants, you can stay for hours on your knees without any pain.

Quick Tips

1. Wash the cut flowers using baking soda to remove chemicals. Add plant food to extend the life of the flower. Aspirin, vinegar, and pepper oil will keep the container clean.
2. Keep flowers immersed in water when cutting them. This allows water rather than air to go into the stem. In the garden, cut the stem a little longer than needed, and cut in the water to the desired length.
3. When arranging flowers create line and space, in order to convey fluid motion appropriate to living things.
4. Pay attention to basic shapes. Triangular shapes will give height and width.
5. Because repetition is more visible in a circular flower arrangement, it is more pleasing to the eye.
6. In Ikebana flower arrangements, remember to use an odd number of flowers. Never use just four flowers. The Japanese word for four sounds like death in their language. And don't allow leaves or flowers to touch the water or rim of the vase. (While we may not actually study or practice Ikebana, I am mentioning this to emphasize that we must be aware of these details, and not be passive photographers who just show up to take pictures.)
7. Try to find the rhythm and balance in the arrangement.
8. Look for contrast of colors, texture, and form to avoid monotony.
9. When you compose, pay close attention to the background.
10. Do not pay attention to the "rule of thirds"; it will not work with flowers. Flowers are great subjects for closeup work: they make good abstracts.
11. Use diffuse soft light to control contrast and bring out the natural colors.
12. Try using an 81B or magenta filter to warm up the photograph.
13. If your camera can accept a cable release, use one to help avoid camera shake.
14. Before you release the shutter use the depth of field preview button. This will give you an approximate idea of the area in focus.
15. If you don't want to spend lot of money for macro lens, try using two-element diopter lenses (which are attached to the front of the lens like filters). These are better than single-element diopter lenses when you consider edge-to-edge sharpness.
16. Experienced nature photographers use flash, believe it or not. Keep it off camera, positioned to one side of the flower using an extension cable or a slave trigger. This will give you control over contrast as well as directional light.

4 Equipment care

If you are driving from your house to a garden very early on a cold morning, keep the lens in the trunk and the camera body inside the car. Otherwise as soon as you take out your lens from the warm car, condensation will form on it. Keeping the camera body in the car will preserve the life of the battery. Avoid constantly chimping the LCD while in the field; it will drain the battery fast.

7 Have a ball

In the field, I prefer a good tripod with a ball head and a quick-release plate attached to the long lens. It'll be easier to turn the camera at any angle; and when you're walking around looking for a better angle, it's a cinch to take the rig off the tripod and hang around your neck.

5 The shadow side

It is natural for leaves and flowers to face the sun. The surface facing the sun is the front side of the leaf or flower. That is the side we see most often. Why not photograph the same flower from the back side? Always try different ways to look at the same subject. Also try different backgrounds for your photograph. Most of the time a background plays a key role in enhancing the subject.

6 Winged surprise

If you're lucky, early morning shoots can bring unexpected beautiful butterflies and dragonflies fluttering into the picture — they are often trapped or sleeping inside the flowers, with dew laden wings that won't allow them to fly away so fast yet. Be quick, they will not stay more than ten to fifteen minutes as they dry up fast when the sun comes out.



(Turn to page E-5)