



Photography
in the Garden

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Photography in the Garden

Photography has been a passion for me since my high school days when I was the yearbook photographer, but it wasn't until about 12 years ago that I also got bitten by the gardening bug (figuratively) and combined the two endeavors. It was a match made in heaven!

Photography and gardens are a natural fit due to the variety of subjects, types of light, patterns and color palettes available. No matter the season, there is always something to photograph in the natural world, from a bird's eye view to a worm's eye view. Here, I share my tips for how I capture beautiful images in public gardens as well as my own backyard.

Read and Watch

If you have read photography how-to books before, they almost always begin with, "read the manual" or "get to know your camera." There is a reason for this. The more you know about what your camera can do for you, the more natural it will feel when you're shooting. You won't have to second-guess whether you're doing something right or not. Shooting will become second nature to you (I promise) and you can spend your time seeking out compelling subjects and composing thoughtful and memorable images. Read your manual in small chunks and have your camera nearby, so you can see where the controls and menus are.

There are so many informative and free videos online; most likely there are videos highlighting the features of your particular camera. Some are better than others, of course, but they can be an invaluable resource in your self-education as a photographer.

I searched for "Nikon D800" and found more than 270,000 videos that highlight that model. Many are reviews by both amateur and professional photographers. Some are detailed how-to videos that are either generalized tutorials, while others cover a specific feature of the camera. There are more than 260,000 videos related to my Nikon

D7000. There are other sites that offer free tutorials and/or fee-based subscriptions. Three of my favorites are www.kelbyone.com, www.creativelive.com, and www.craftsy.com.

Get Down and Dirty

I've captured some of my best images while sitting down, eye-level to the flower bed. These unusual perspectives capture a view that most observers will never consider, making your images more memorable. While you're down in the trenches, shoot upward and catch petals backlit by the sun, and photograph the backs of flowers as well. From this perspective, you also slow down long enough to really notice the tiny insects and pollinators that inhabit your garden. Getting down and dirty also allows you to include a brilliant blue summer sky behind your subject, adding more pops of color. I always carry a trash bag in my camera bag so I can sit and capture images of flowers laden with freshly fallen rain.

Harness the Light

Most of the time I prefer shooting gardens in the early morning or late afternoon, preferably when the sky is overcast, making for more saturated color and no harsh shadows. If I'm out shooting on a sunny day, I will bring along a tri-grip reflector to diffuse the light over my subject. Although there are many brands of diffusers available, I found one from Fancier Studio that is less than \$20 from www.Amazon.com and that folds down like a car sun shade to fit perfectly in a camera bag. The closer you hold the diffuser to

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This corner of my townhouse backyard garden has a tiny pond with my "Zen" frog holding court, a gravel pathway strewn with dollar-store glass marbles, and my handmade cast cement leaves painted in metallic jewel tones. This bright spot in my backyard garden is a great subject to photograph.



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your subject, the more the light will glow. Put your camera on a tripod, leaving one hand free to hold the diffuser.

I know what you're thinking—who wants to lug around a tripod? I am a very steady hand-held shooter but, when shooting flowers and insects, I shoot with a tripod 95% of the time. It forces me to slow down, be more deliberate with my compositions, assess various angles and backgrounds, spot tiny bugs, and most important—achieve the sharpest focus possible. A tripod is probably my most important photographic accessory!

When I'm shooting flowers without a diffuser, I look for backlit petals and dappled background light behind my subject. I rarely shoot flower close-ups in direct mid-day sunlight because of the harsh shadows created on petals. I will, however, capture wide shots of an entire garden or garden bed from a distance when the sun is out. These types of shots work best when the sky is very blue and filled with puffy white clouds.

Divide and Conquer

Don't immediately center your subject. While extreme closeups of a single flower work best centered, try dividing your frame into thirds like a tic-tac-toe grid—and place your subject on a cross-line of that grid. If you place your subject off center, look for interesting lines or texture in the "empty" space for added impact.

Vertical, Horizontal, Long Shot or Macro?

The beauty of shooting digitally is that it doesn't cost you any extra to capture multiple variations of your subject. Shoot horizontal and vertical shots of the same scene. Some subjects demand one orientation or the other. For instance, if you're photographing a tall sunflower, you might immediately choose a vertical orientation to get the entire plant in the frame. Get that image, but then move in closer and get a horizontal shot of just the flower head. Position the flower center in the middle and get a closeup of the seeds. Move the subject off center and capture part of the flower and then the blue sky to the right or left. Shoot it again vertically, cropping tightly and placing half the bloom at the bottom with a bright blue sky above it. Turn your camera at an angle and see if that creates a striking image. Don't get stuck with just one orientation. The process of composing a great shot is always fluid for me, even if the orientation may be obvious at first.

Beware the Background

What is in the background is as important as your actual subject. Keep your backgrounds clean and simple and your subject will shine. Adjust your angle so you can exclude distracting "hot spots" of light or dead foliage and stems. Isolate your flowers against a bright blue sky or backdrop of darker foliage. Let your background fall out of focus by shooting with larger apertures.

In cases when I can't control the background (i.e., cars, a parking lot, people or spent foliage), I put a black or white sheet of foamcore board or a collapsible reflector behind my subject. This gives my shot a studio-like quality and eliminates a distracting background.

Beauty Really is In the Details

Sure, you can photograph a beautiful tulip or a group of Shasta daisies, but don't stop there. Move in closer and capture dramatic textures and patterns, such as pollen-covered stamens, veins in leaves (especially beautiful when backlit by the sun), or a cluster of raindrops on a petal. I always shoot overall views and then move in closer for tighter compositions. If you pay attention to composition and lighting, even weeds and dried flower heads and seed pods can be photo-worthy.

The Sum of the Whole

Remember to photograph all the parts of a flower, from a fuzzy stem (you'll often find tiny bugs clinging to them!) to a curled leaf or a single petal. Move



in closer and crop tightly for more dramatic images and texture. Shoot from different angles, too—top, sides and below. Looking down over the flower is a great place to start, but also consider shooting a side view of the flower, or get under the flower for a shot from the ground looking up.

Water, Water, Everywhere

Photographs taken after rainfall will be more saturated in color and the light will be clearer and more even. And if Mother Nature won't provide it, create

your own drama by watering your garden and photographing closeups of petals covered in water drops.

Color Play

Some of my most dramatic images are of a brightly colored flower against a contrasting background, such as hot pink coneflower against a lime green shrub. Look for striking color combinations, such as purple and yellow, white against dark green, or orange against purple. When I planned my garden

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Look up! I captured these brilliant yellow ginkgo branches against a crisp blue October sky, making for a dynamic image with contrast color and lots of energy.



Be sure to capture the whimsical elements of a garden, such as this overhead shot of a birdbath filled with inspirational words on rocks.



When it rains...grab your camera and photograph raindrops on foliage and blooms, or make your own with a spray mister or watering can.



bed, I intentionally chose plants that would contrast against each other for photographs.

Consider the Critters

To me, there is nothing more rewarding than having an insect in my composition. Since I use a tripod, I am prepared when a butterfly sweeps in or a bee comes to pollinate the bloom. The addition of an insect will elevate your image beyond a standard “record” shot. Photograph the flowers as they are, then if you wait long enough, a critter will meander in to enhance your composition!

Identification

If you’re photographing a plant in a public garden and it has a label, get a shot of the plant label before and after you shoot the plant or flowers. I always do this so that I have the information at hand not only for blogging purposes but also for my archives. The more you do this, the more you’ll be able to identify these plants in the future. Most of the plants I photograph are labeled, but when they aren’t, I do some sleuthing on the Internet to narrow down the possibilities. I also ask fellow gardeners for help in identification. You may think it’s extra work and isn’t important, but I promise you that you’ll thank me for this advice one day!

As far as identifying insects, some are obvious (bumblebees, ladybugs, certain butterflies), while others are not. Sometimes all it takes is an online search for something as simple as “yellow and black striped beetle” to find out that your latest image is a Striped Cucumber Beetle. Then the next time you photograph this insect, you’ll know exactly what it is (an added bonus—you can astound and amaze your friends with your newfound knowledge!).

Sharing Your Work with the World

I highly recommend that you start a (free) blog to showcase your work. It will serve as a chronicle of your photographic journey and you’ll get feedback from nature lovers and fellow photographers. I use WordPress and pay an inexpensive fee to have additional storage space. I started my main blogs (www.cindydyer.wordpress.com) in August 2007 to chronicle my gardening endeavors. I find that regular blogging has kept me more active in photography and improved my writing skills, too. I also post all my garden-related photos and photo essays on my garden-only blog, www.gardenmuse.wordpress.com

Sharing my photography through my blog garnered the attention of an editor at Nikon, who interviewed me for an online tutorial, “How to Grow

Your Garden Photography Skills,” for Nikon’s Learn & Explore series in 2011.

After my first botanical photography exhibit at Green Spring Gardens in Alexandria, VA, in spring of 2012, I was contacted by the USPS to work with one of their stamp art directors. Since then, I’ve had 10 images used in stamps (Ferns, 2014; Water Lilies, 2014; and an image of Sacred Lotus from Kenilworth Park & Aquatic Gardens for the 16-stamp panel commemorating the 100th anniversary of the National Park Service, 2016). The gift shops at Kenilworth and Green Spring Gardens sell my matted prints, greeting cards and photo jewelry.

My botanical images have been published in *American Photo*, *Shutterbug*, *Dig-It* digital magazine, *American Philatelist*, the *Washington Post*, and many others. Showcasing your work—whether online in a blog or portfolio site or in a physical photography exhibit—can open doors to wonderful opportunities.

Photographing gardens and the natural world has been enormously rewarding for me. What began simply as a way to record my garden endeavors has morphed into a new outlet for my creativity as well as a source of revenue for my studio.



There are other free sites that can showcase your portfolio such as Picasa Web Albums, Flickr, Tumblr, Wix, Pinterest and Instagram. Look at fee-based portfolio sites such as www.zenfolio.com, www.photoshelter.com, www.squarespace.com, www.foliolink.com and www.pbase.com, to name a few. If you have a Facebook account, post photos there or start a Facebook page just for your images.

My final advice is to practice, practice, practice! Read your manual, shoot regularly, mingle with fellow photographers, learn how to process your digital images, and most importantly—always stay curious!

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In this image, placing the dragonfly off-center with an out-of-focus Sacred Lotus bud to the left creates a bit of tension and drama.



I shot this Love-in-a-Mist bloom with an overhead angle and created an off-center composition under diffused light.



Off-center composition, three elements, tight cropping and brilliant color make this a strong image.



I was rewarded for my patience when a dragonfly landed in this shot of a water lily.



Learn how to stop down your camera's aperture to create striking silhouettes like this moody twilight shot of a Praying Mantis.



Look for interesting patterns of light and shapes for your backgrounds. Here, I diffused the subject against a stained-glass pattern created by the sunlight.

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Watch for curving lines that lead your viewer's eye into the photograph, such as this shot of a verdant lawn abutting a beautiful perennial border at Green Spring Gardens in Alexandria, VA.

When I visit botanical gardens or private gardens, I always start with overall images of garden areas, then move closer in to capture the details of individual plants, flowers and insects.

I initially explore a garden, looking for interesting lines and curves of flower beds. My goal is to not only tell a story, but to invite my viewers into my photos.



Harness the sunlight by capturing images that are backlit, such as this translucent Morning Glory bloom, which glows in the afternoon sun. Notice the woman holding a baby in the center of the flower?



An overhead shot of a Red Spider lily makes for an abstract image. Because of the height of the plant, the dark shaded ground fell to black, increasing the drama.



Look for interesting curves in your compositions. These Jones' Bluestar blooms formed a pleasing "S" shape and lead your eye through the photograph.



Something as simple as foliage veins backlit by the sun can make for a dramatic and abstract image.



Radiating lines, bright color and a summer shower make for a striking image of a Lady's Mantle leaf. The addition of a handheld LED light adds sparkle to the raindrops.



Here's my take on a cornucopia of the harvest from my garden. Enlist a friend as a hand model for shots like this.



Create beautiful still-life images with your harvest. Although my backyard harvest was meager the year I shot this image, what it did produce made for some colorful images.

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Try putting your subject off-center. Be sure the other two-thirds of your photo have visual impact as well, such as the pattern of the lily leaves here.



Who doesn't love the beautiful Morning Glory? For an unexpected shot, photograph the blooms from the back. The radiating lines create a beautiful pattern and make for a more abstract image.



As simple a composition as there is—bright color, radiating lines, center line at a diagonal, overcast light. Simple, elegant and graphic—my three favorite elements in composition!



Isolating a portion of a flower, backlit by the afternoon sun, created this abstract image. A large aperture ensures that the background would be out of focus, allowing the subject to shine.



Patience, steady hands and a wide aperture were the requisites to create this image at a local butterfly exhibit where tripods were not allowed.



An extreme closeup of the petals of a Sacred Indian lotus bloom shows the delicate texture and color gradation.

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In this shot of Agapanthus, I used a diffuser to soften the light on the flowers, but allowed the bright sunlight to create a luminous glow in the background.



Patience, a tripod and backlighting make this Halloween Pennant dragonfly image one of my favorites. Be patient—dragonflies tend to come back to the same stalk numerous times, so don't give up!



Look for repeating patterns. The repetition of these Speedwell blooms gives the appearance of a stadium crowd and adds whimsy to the image.



When shot from underneath, this Star Hibiscus against a brilliant cornflower blue sky is an image that packs a powerful punch of color and texture in a graphic composition.



Photograph clusters of blooms, like this overhead shot of Love-in-a-Mist flowers. Pay attention to the curving lines and be deliberate with your composition, cropping to eliminate spent blooms.



Move in close and crop tightly—you don't have to show the entire bloom to capture a compelling image. In this diffused shot, the background fell to black, resulting in a studio-like shot.

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A solitary Sacred Indian lotus petal fell onto the lotus leaf. An off-center composition and the radiating lines of the leaf elevate the petal, which glows in diffused morning light.



Contrasting backgrounds allow your subject to pop. I photographed these hot pink tulips against a bed of bright yellow daffodils in a conservatory. Diffused light saturated the colors.



This photo of Siberian iris showcases one of my favorite contrasting color schemes—purple against lime green.



Don't limit your point of view from just the top of a flower. The radiating lines of this bloom and the wavy curl of the petals at the top create a graceful image softly lit by the late afternoon sun.



I usually strive for an odd numbers of flowers in many of my compositions. Here, the three New England Aster blooms create a crescent-shaped curve downward like a waterfall.



Capture the anticipation of a bud just before it unfurls. The foliage background was quite a distance away and I used a wider aperture, so there was ample "bokeh" (out-of-focus shapes) created.

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Repetition, radiating lines and an odd number (seven) of elements made this image of water lily leaves graphic and compelling.



An off-center composition, diffused lighting and the contrast of white against dark allow these tiny flowers to take center stage. Note the visual interest in the "blank space" above.



Brilliant color, off-center composition and the radiating lines in the leaf make this shot of a Nasturtium one of my favorite images.



Move in close to show texture and detail like I did in this image of the head of a White coneflower bloom. Experiment with different angles—off-center, centering, on the diagonal. You might get lucky and have a butterfly swoop in!



Sometimes it is simply the color that makes an image sing. These bright red Cardinal flower blooms are radiant against a sunlit lime green foliage background. The curve of the stem also creates some energy.



Although I rarely photograph flowers in direct sunlight, here I made an exception. Dappled sunlight added drama and emphasized the shape and texture of these Daffodils.

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The background behind this Bearded iris in my front yard was an asphalt road, so I placed a black fabric collapsible background behind the stalk and further darkened the background in post production.



I used a wide-angle lens close to the sunflower in the foreground. The field retains sharp focus and the off-center composition adds to the composition—sunflowers on a sunny summer day!



We found this bright green Praying Mantis on my husband's sleeve and carefully moved the insect to a bed of purple Sweet Potato vines to get this shot. Serendipity!



The background behind this Bearded iris was a parking lot. I used my diffuser as a solid white background, then brightened the white section in post production.



Visual interest is created with the curving lines of this bed of Pansies. Repetition and pattern also play heavily and the pastel tones created a more subdued palette.



Beauty is everywhere—even in a median strip on a busy street! Backlighting made this Gladiola stalk glow in the late evening sun. It really is all about the light!

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This shot of one corner of my townhouse garden invites the viewer's eye to follow the path to the colorful bench.



I chose this composition because the three curvy stems lead the eye to these lovely orange poppies, plus gives a sense of movement and whimsy to the image. Explore horizontal and vertical compositions in your plant portraits. Placing the poppies off center in this image created a dynamic composition.



Look for unique vantage points and different ways to frame your focal point—in this case, the gazebo at Green Spring Gardens. In this composition, I used the perennial bed to draw the viewer's eye to the structure.



I positioned my camera to include the diagonal leaf that follows the curve of these delicate Lily-of-the-valley blooms.

IPHONE PHOTOGRAPHY



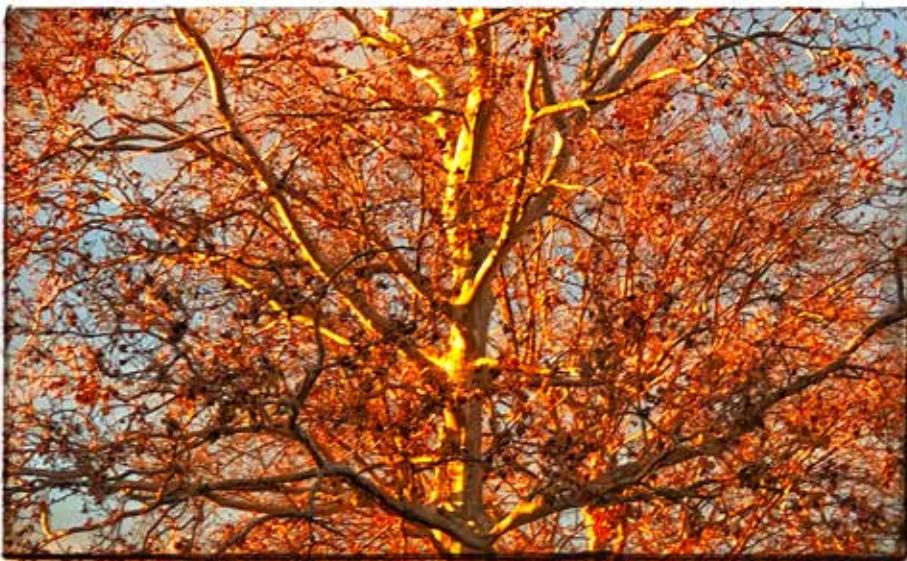
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That saying, "the best camera is the one you have with you" is so true. I always have my iPhone handy so I can capture shots to share on social media while I'm in the garden. Fun apps allow me to tweak my images in creative directions. I add borders to my phone images for an artistic touch. The Camera+ app has a great macro mode for closeup shots. I also love shooting in panoramic mode.

Resources and Inspiration

FREE TRAINING SITES

www.beyondmegapixels.com/
www.strobist.com
www.digitalphotographyschool.com
www.digitalphotopro.com
www.lighting-essentials.com/
www.photoshouser.com/
www.diyphotography.net

FEE-BASED TRAINING SITES

www.creativelive.com
www.craftsy.com
www.skillshare.com
www.kelbyone.com

GARDEN PHOTOGRAPHY

www.davidperryphoto.com
www.saxonholt.com
www.robcardillo.com
www.professionalgardenphotographers.com

INSECT/MACRO/NATURE PHOTOGRAPHERS

photo.net/photos/siwanowicz
myrmecos.net
www.mplonsky.com/photo
www.bkloflin.wordpress.com

RECOMMENDED READING

Macro Photography for Gardeners and Nature Lovers: The Essential Guide to Digital Techniques
by Alan L. Detrick

Macro Photography: Learning From a Master
by Gilles Martin and Ronan Loaec

Nature Photography Close-Up: Macro Techniques in the Field
by Paul Harcourt Davies

Small Things Big: Close-Up and Macro Photography
by Paul Harcourt Davies

Better Picture Guide to Flower & Garden Photography
by Michael Busselle

The Art of Garden Photography
by Ian Adams

Close Up & Macro: A Photographic Guide
by Robert Thompson

Close-Up on Insects: A Photographer's Guide
by Robert Thompson

Photographing Plants & Gardens
by Clive Nichols

The Art of Flower & Garden Photography
by Clive Nichols

Digital Macro & Close-up Photography
by Ross Haddinott

What's in My Bag?

I shoot a variety of subjects (events, products, stock, travel and people), but I outfit my garden photography bag with only the items I'll use.

GEAR

- Nikon D850 and Nikon D800
- Nikkor 105mm micro 2.8 VR lens
- Nikkor 24mm 2.8 ED lens
- Nikon Speedlight SB-700 or SB-900 (for fill or bounce off a white card or handheld reflector)
- Nikon remote cord for using flash off-camera
- Small handheld LED light (Five Below store)
- Benro C298EX Flip tripod (can quickly switch from vertical to horizontal center column positions)
- Manfrotto 322RC2 Joystick Head
- iPhone 8Plus

ACCESSORIES

- Microfiber lens cleaning cloth and bulb blower
- Extra batteries for camera and flash
- Think Tank® Pixel Pocket Rocket to hold SD and CF cards (16gb/32gb)
- Fancier Studio tri-grip diffuser
- Business cards
- Cell phone (plus portable charger)
- Collapsible sun hat and sunscreen
- Small notebook and pen
- Plastic garbage bag to sit on

PHONE APPS

- Snapseed
- 645 Pro
- Mextures
- Camera+
- Impresso
- Distressed FX
- Prisma
- Font Candy
- PS Express
- HDR FX Pro
- Light Trac
- LongExpo Pro

I'm available for private instruction. E-mail me at cindydyerdesign@gmail.com for information or call 703.577.4122.

Photography Portfolios

www.cindydyer.zenfolio.com
www.cindydyerphotography.com
www.cindydyerportraits.com
<https://500px.com/cindydyerphoto>

Blogs

www.cindydyer.wordpress.com
www.gardenmuse.wordpress.com

How to Grow Your Garden Photography Skills

www.nikonusa.com/en/Learn-And-Explore/Article/gr35ffdt/How-To-Grow-Your-Garden-Photography-Skills.html