

HOW \* YOU CAN DO IT



HAROLD DAVIS



# Pure Petals

## Make flowers look translucent

**HAROLD DAVIS'** ethereal floral arrangements have a purity and translucence that borders on the spiritual. His website, [www.digitalfieldguide.com](http://www.digitalfieldguide.com), offers a virtual garden of shimmering orchids, irises, lilies, and poppy petals, all carefully produced in his Berkeley, CA, studio.

If you imagined these photos are difficult to pull off, you'd be right. His explanation of the technique, though, is disarmingly simple: "I take out the midtones and shadows." Still, a single image can take days to perfect.

Davis starts with a large light table left over from his slide-shooting days on which he places his subjects. You can start with a small table for single blossoms, though—one with daylight-balanced tubes. After mastering the technique, upgrade to a larger table for grander arrangements. Tempted to build your own? You can backlight a sheet of translucent acrylic, but a real light table is easier to use and gives consistent results.

You will also need a good macro lens, a flash (or well-positioned window) for front fill light, and image-editing software that lets you work with layers and layer masks.

Davis achieves his translucent look with the right combination of back light, front light, bracketed exposures, and image editing. In Adobe Photoshop CS6, he layers between 5 and 15 different exposures, and then essentially erases their midtones and shadows. You will find a

detailed explanation in his excellent book, *Photographing Flowers*, (Focal Press; \$30).

He also offers the following suggestions:

- **START WITH ONE FLOWER**, especially if you don't have the knack for arranging. Davis recommends books on Japanese floral design and community college courses on the subject.

- **GIVE YOUR FLORAL ARRANGEMENTS** structure, focal points, rhythm, and the illusion of depth. In the photo shown here, the structure comes from the stems, the rhythm from the repeated shapes and colors of similar flowers, and the depth from the green leaves tucked behind the petals.

- **FINESSE THE LIGHT** in front of your subject. Selectively adding light can also give your floral arrangement depth. If you frontlight your flowers evenly, it can flatten out overall modeling. So vary where and how brightly the frontlight falls.

- **PICK THE RIGHT FLOWERS**. Buy a variety of them, with multiple blossoms in contrasting colors. A large, single flower, like the orange day lily in the photo shown here, can serve as a focal point in a composition.

- **EXPERIMENT** with different blending modes when you work with the image layers in editing software.

- **MOISTURIZE!** With some types of flowers, wetting the petals can increase their translucency.

—Peter Kolonia



To shoot his arrangements, Davis used a Nikon D300 (A) and Sigma 50mm f/2.8 DG Macro lens (C), then composited multiple bracketed exposures. He mounted his camera on a tripod and aimed it precisely using a Kirk Enterprises BH-3 ballhead (B).



## Step 1

**Get the flowers.** Diaphanous blossoms such as poppies or cherries work well; most roses will not. Avoid flowers that are wilted or have age spots or tears. While shopping, imagine how the final composition will look.

## Step 2

**Arrange the flowers on the light table.** If you're not very good at this, ask for help from a friend who is. This person should also help you pick out the flowers.

## Step 3

**Set the front fill light.** Davis prefers controlled natural light and places his light table below a window whose brightness he controls by opening or closing venetian blinds. When window light wasn't sufficient, he has also bounced strobes off the ceiling.

## Step 4

**Make your exposures.** Bracket RAW exposures by shutter speeds in the camera's manual exposure mode. Davis prefers f/16 and ISO 100, and his first exposure is what the camera's meter considers correct. He then slows the shutter speed of subsequent exposures by 1 EV until the image is pure white.

## Final Step

**Apply software.** For the translucent look, layer the files with the lightest image at the bottom of your stack. When converting from RAW, keep all settings the same for each exposure. Add hide-all (black) layer masks to each layer and then brush in detail from the darker frames using a soft-edge, partially opaque brush. A low opacity setting is key.