

GO MACRO TO EXPLORE THE BEAUTIFUL DETAILS AND VARIETIES OF FLOWERS

Make Stunning Floral Images

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY HAROLD DAVIS

ALSTROEMERIA MEDLEY: I photographed this arrangement of Alstroemerias (Peruvian lilies) straight down on a light box, then used a series of LAB color adjustments in Photoshop to create the painterly effect you see here.

85mm macro, seven exposures combined in Photoshop, exposures at shutter speeds ranging from 1/4 of a second to five seconds, each exposure at f/64 and ISO 200, tripod mounted

I like to photograph flowers. In fact, I love to photograph flowers! It turns out that I'm in good photographic company. Flowers are a subject that many people want to photograph. However, photographers often don't know how to approach flowers and macros in a creative way that will show the true beauty of their floral models.

Some folks are worried about photographing flowers because they're concerned that their images will be cliché. I'm here to tell you: It doesn't have to be that way. Flowers are riotously beautiful. They're also the epitome of variety in terms of colors, shapes and forms. You don't need a model release to photograph a flower, and if you follow the tips in this article, an entire arena of creative possibilities will open for you in the world of a single flower.

Photograph a flower from an unusual angle. We're used to seeing flowers from the front, straight on. In fact, that's the way the creatures most important to flowers—their pollinators—usually see them. But often, the most interesting floral shapes occur when a flower is viewed in profile rather than head-on. Take the time to really study a flower before you start photographing it. You may be surprised at the many possibilities that aren't initially apparent.

Control the areas of focus. When looking at a photo, the viewer tends to first be attracted to the color, and then to the areas in the photo that are in focus. So the parts of the flower that are in focus are very important to your overall composition. Keep this in mind as you control selective focus through your use of aperture, and with camera positioning. The more parallel the camera is to the plane of focus, the less depth-of-field problems you'll have.

If you don't have a macro lens, improvise by using an extension tube. An extension tube is a relatively inexpensive tube that fits between your lens and the camera. Using an extension tube makes most lenses able to focus closer and produces images that have a greater effective magnification. I've created very good professional-quality macro photos of flowers using extension tubes and a zoom lens instead of a macro lens.

Keep your photos sharp using a tripod. I use a tripod for most of my macro



CHERRY BLOSSOM SPECIAL (ABOVE): The weather was windy with some light rain. At the same time, there was a great deal of diffuse brightness from the sun coming through the clouds. I knew that I wouldn't be able to create a close-up image with a great deal of depth of field. In other words, I couldn't expect the image to be sharp from front to back. So in this image, I focused on the anthers—the portion of the stamen that provides pollen. The in-focus anthers stick out from the flower petals and core; therefore, the flower itself and waterdrops are slightly out of focus.

105mm macro, 1/100 of a second at f/10 and ISO 200, tripod mounted



WIND (ABOVE): As I was driving to a workshop where I was going to teach, I saw an incredible hillside covered with spring wildflowers. Not one to miss an opportunity for a photo, I parked the car and grabbed my gear. Climbing up the hillside, I decided I wanted to get a bee-eye view of an orange California poppy. After getting down on my belly and setting up my camera on a special low tripod, I chose a fairly wide-open aperture (f/5.6) and a reasonably fast shutter speed (1/25 of a second). These settings isolated the California poppy against the out-of-focus blue flowers in the foreground and background.

130mm, 1/25 of a second at f/5.6 and ISO 200, tripod mounted



DAHLIA: I placed this dahlia from my garden on a black background, and lit it from the front using a small LED flashlight. In Photoshop, I combined three exposures to make sure the background went entirely black—and to keep the detail in the flower at the same time (see pages 186–189 in *Photographing Flowers*).

50mm macro, three exposures combined using Photoshop layers at one second, two seconds, and four seconds; each exposure at f/32 and ISO 100, tripod mounted

flower photography. You want a tripod model that lets you maneuver easily close to the flower and a ballhead for variable camera positioning. Be sure to use a remote release with the tripod (or use the self-timer) rather than pressing the shutter

yourself to avoid causing camera movement. In most cases, image stabilization should be turned off when the camera is on a tripod. Locking up your mirror can add significant sharpness at shutter speeds between $\frac{1}{60}$ of a second and two seconds.

Deliberately throw your lens out of focus. Experiment with throwing your lens way out of focus on purpose (you'll need to take your lens off autofocus to do this). Out-of-focus flower images can be hugely colorful and wildly evocative.

Generally, this works best with a telephoto lens and a wide-open aperture. If your photo is out of focus, you want people to know that you did it on purpose, and not think that it might be simply a mistake.

Shoot on a mirror. One of my most used props for flower photography is a mirror. This is inexpensive and easy to find. Go to any window-repair store and order a piece of mirror-backed plate glass.

You can backlight a flower in the studio, and also, this occurs naturally when you're shooting through the flower toward the sun. Some of my best flower "portraits" are shot using backlight.

Keep a piece of black velvet handy. My favorite way to isolate flowers is to drape a black cloth behind them. You can do this in the studio, in a garden or with wild flowers. Black velvet works best because it's very light absorbent and does-



WHITE RANUNCULUS: This white ranunculus was in small pot that I bought at a local horticultural nursery for planting in my garden. To make the photo, I pruned the vegetation of the sides of the flower, and then isolated it using a black velvet cloth. I shot the flower in my studio using natural light. When I was done, I removed the cloth and found a home for the plant outside.

50mm macro, eight exposures at shutter speeds ranging from $\frac{1}{8}$ of a second to four seconds, exposures combined in Photoshop, each exposure at f/32 and ISO 200, tripod mounted

A small shooting surface (18x24 inches) should cost less than \$20.

Try backlighting. Many flowers and their petals are translucent. This means they're excellent candidates for backlighting, where the primary light source comes from behind the flower rather than being reflected from the flower's "face."

n't have an obvious pattern or nap. You can buy black velvet inexpensively by the yard at any fabric store.

Use a light tent. A light tent is a standard and inexpensive way to provide over-all diffuse lighting, most often employed in product photography. Using a light tent can be a great starting point for light-

ing your flower photos.

Try wabi-sabi. Flowers are still beautiful after their first bloom. Don't throw your flowers away just because they've started to fade. Sometimes, flowers in decay are more beautiful than they were originally, and if you ignore flowers in decay, you're missing a tremendous opportunity. In Japanese art, enjoyment of the beauty of something that's past its prime is called *wabi-sabi*, and I always look for *wabi-sabi* possibilities in my flower photography.

Paint sunflowers like Vincent van Gogh. Take advantage of the free Pixel Bender filter from Adobe Labs, and use the Oil Paint filter to create flowers that look as if van Gogh had painted them. If you have Photoshop, the software is free, and you don't even have to give up an ear! Go to <http://labs.adobe.com/technologies/pixelbenderplugin/>,

Shoot flowers for black-and-white. Flowers are inherently colorful, but their shapes, lines and forms are graceful and interesting visually. Consider setting up flower compositions that emphasize the compositional aspects of your flower photograph and are presented in monochrome.

Shoot flowers on a lightbox for transparency. Lightboxes used for artist tracing or art presentation are available from many sources fairly inexpensively. These can be used as a backlight source for creating images of flowers where the flowers seem translucent. As I explain in my book *Photographing Flowers* it works best if you shoot for a high-key result with the camera on a tripod, and combine several exposures, starting with an overexposed, bright image for the background. I then "paint" the petals of the flower in using layers and layer masks in Photoshop. DP



HAROLD DAVIS is an award-winning professional photographer and the author of many best-selling photography books, including *Photographing Flowers: Exploring Macro Worlds with Harold Davis* (Focal Press).

Davis is also a Moab Paper Printmaking Master. His images are widely collected and commissioned, and his popular workshops are often sold out. He lives in Berkeley, Calif., with his wife, Phyllis Davis, and their four children. You can learn more about Harold Davis and his photography at www.photoblog2.com