

Enjoy Photographing Your Garden

tips from my slide talk, given to local gardening clubs (so mostly aimed at gardeners with little photographic knowledge)

Most of these suggestions will work whatever kind of camera you use. I believe many people's disappointment with their garden photographs comes from having taken them at the wrong time of day (what to our incredibly adaptable eyes looks like lovely sunshine will be seen by your camera as harsh glare with ugly black shadows); and also not really working out what exactly is exciting you about the subject in front of you.

It's my hope that some of these tips will help you to improve your results, and that you'll get much pleasure from photographing your garden. Photography gives you an excuse to experience your garden/nature intimately, and this is immensely satisfying in itself, whatever the resulting images look like. Don't forget it's vital to pursue *your* excitement and ignore what you fear other people may think of your image: you'll find your own way as long as you follow your enthusiasm.

Have an aim in mind for your photography

It's much more satisfying to be taking photographs for a reason; and to know that you will share the best of them in some form. Here are some ideas:

- Pictures for your wall (or crazy wallpaper).
- Personal stationery, greetings cards, calendars, etc.
- An album that celebrates your garden.

- A slide show/DVD.
- Work on a series of photographs that illustrate a theme; or perhaps a particular species you love.
- Use photography as part of a garden design scrapbook – to record your garden (and especially to identify the areas that aren't working), and to steal ideas from other gardens

Improving your results

Bond with your camera

SLR cameras are the easiest to use and to get rewarding results from (because you can see exactly what you're taking, and what settings the camera's using, as you look through the viewfinder). Compact digital cameras do allow for close-ups at very low cost, though (with an SLR you'll need a close-up filter or an expensive macro lens for really close work). Find a camera that feels right for you and *use* it!

Follow the light and the weather

The blue-sky days we all enjoy are the trickiest light in which to make successful garden photographs. In Britain from May to July the sun is too harsh from 7.30 a.m. to 6 p.m. on a sunny day: you'll end up with washed-out colours and ugly black shadows on petals. Professionals get up before dawn, but a still evening is the most relaxed time for most people. Great light is vital for views, which are in fact landscape photographs.

If you want to take photographs in midday sun (e.g. when you're visiting other gardens), go in close and/or use a polarizer (with an SLR camera) to cut down on glare (leaves

reflect the sky, so a polarizer can be invaluable even on cloudy days).

Cloudy days (or, better, hazy sun), with their soft light, are best for details of flowers and to show off planting schemes without distracting shadows.

If it's windy you need to step back and keep shutter speeds high (e.g. put your camera on an action/sports setting) to stop the motion; or use a tripod and experiment with blurry long exposures.

Shooting after a shower can make for great images (heavy rain, however, tends to make everything unattractively sodden – you want those magical raindrops and intensified colours).

Garden subjects

Views – find a path through the image (this could be a river of colour or a foreground element that echoes the background but at a different scale). You need to find an element that will simplify and unite your photograph. Also look beyond the garden's boundaries for a view out that links the garden to its surrounding landscape. You'll need great light to really bring a view photograph to life.

Neglected corners – look beyond any automatic assumptions you have: there may be beauty in lacy leaves eaten by caterpillars, or a neglected weed patch.

Insects – the best time to catch butterflies with their wings open is a cool morning or in autumn, when they need to spread them to warm themselves. Plant plenty of marginals

round your pond to provide perches for emerging dragonflies.

Colour challenges – be aware that some flower colours will appear significantly different to your camera than they do to your eye – blues and violets, especially, can be tricky. You may need to experiment with different light on the subject (shade may work better than sun, for example), and different films; or edit the colour later on your computer if you shoot digital. Also be aware that our eyes are especially alert to red; and that including white flowers in a shot will be distracting – so only include them when your composition is designed around them.

Flower arrangements – you can bunch flowers together for rich colour combinations. I find vases of flowers look best photographed out in the garden in morning or evening light (this is the ultimate cheat!).

Keep reframing until you're excited

Work out exactly what excites you in each composition and frame to play that up and eliminate anything that distracts from it (e.g. an uneventful sky or intrusions round the edges of the frame). Explore different points of view – look at the back of a flower; try a worm's-eye or a bird's-eye view; walk around your subject and see how it looks different as the angle of the sun to it alters.

Learn the difference between the emotional editing we do in reality, and how we see that live, 3D scene when it's collapsed flat on to paper: all the distractions you didn't notice at the time will be visible, especially to other people who didn't share your original experience. Digital makes this process easier, since you can get an idea of how a print will

look by reviewing your capture on the camera's LCD screen – and then of course you can retake it if the composition doesn't work.

Use depth of field (how much of the photograph is in focus from front to back) selectively – you can blur what you don't want the viewer to focus on and throw distracting highlights out of focus. You'll need an SLR for this (preferably with depth-of-field preview); alternatively you can apply Gaussian blur when you're editing digital captures on your computer.

Throw away all the near-misses!

Keep only the pictures that excite you – they needn't be technically perfect; nor need they appeal to anyone else but you, but don't keep (and definitely don't show anyone) any image you're not happy with, or don't want to take further (for example, to crop for use in a collage).

Don't compare!

Everyone has their own unique perspective on the world and it's always valuable to develop this and to share it with others.

Give yourself permission to make mistakes

There's more than one right answer; this is playtime (your own garden is a great place to play with a camera, especially because you can grab the light). It's *vital* to be willing to make mistakes if you're to make successes also. You want to make photographs that are alive; not 'perfect'.

It's valuable to see the beauty yourself, even if you can't capture it in an image (it may go beyond the visual). Don't

get fixated on results; and protect yourself from destructive criticism – it's not the way to grow creatively.

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