



PHOTO MASTERCLASS PART THREE

PLANT PORTRAITS

in association with
TAMRON



You might think that plants make relatively easy photographic subjects, but there are many things you need to consider to bring out the best in your floral pictures. Controlling the light and wind levels, trying different angles and learning to love rain can make all the difference.

WITH WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHER MARK CARWARDINE

PLANT PHOTOGRAPHERS HAVE to use more imagination and creativity to produce really eye-catching pictures than most other nature photographers. Their subjects are relatively static (they do not yawn, breach or run) and even the most exotic and colourful species photograph badly without beautiful lighting, an artistic crop, the right depth of field and so on. It's not surprising that budding plant photographers often find it difficult to see past the jungle of foliage and isolate a single, striking concept.

Even professionals fall into fixed ways of thinking and working. The challenge is to break out of this photographic rut and push the boundaries. When is the best time of day – or best time of year – to photograph

a particular plant? Is it in tiptop condition or slightly damaged? (You have to be brutally critical of your subjects and discard anything less than perfect.) Does every element need to be in sharp focus or is a little selective focusing likely to produce more interesting results? Are there any interesting textures (which can add a tactile quality to the picture) or minute details in the petals, leaves, branches or trunks? There are so many weird and wonderful variations and possibilities.

This month we'll be overturning many of the preconceptions about plant photography, discussing how to overcome some of the challenges and learning a few invaluable tricks that will help transform otherwise ordinary pictures into shots with real artistic merit.

▲ Peter Lilja's flowering ox-eye daisies are striking against a blue sky. It shows the value of getting down on your hands and knees – or lower – to get the best out of your subject.



MEET THE EXPERT...

Every issue, our world famous photographers share their knowledge and skills.

PETER LILJA SWEDEN

Peter Lilja is an award-winning photographer based in northern Sweden. He won the Wildlife Photographer of the Year 'In Praise of Plants' category in 2002.



Anton Lilja

Peter Lilja laughs when I ask about his favourite time of day for photographing plants. "I prefer late evening light to early morning light," he says, "because I find it hard to get out of bed first thing in the morning." Joking aside, he points out that good light is crucial to plant photography and he'll often wait for many hours until the conditions are just right. During the summer near his home in northern Sweden, he frequently works through the night to make the most of the long hours of gorgeous light.

Peter works in two ways: searching for suitable subjects on a spontaneous basis, and planning ahead to photograph a particular species when it is looking its best. He rarely just walks around, preferring to get down on his hands and knees to look for the most perfect specimens.

"I spend a lot of time lying on the ground, at or below the level of the plants, trying different lenses to compose the shot."

He designs a photograph through the camera viewfinder rather than with his naked eye. "I spend a lot of time lying on the ground, at or below the level of the plants, trying different lenses to compose the shot," he says. "And when I start work I use a beanbag, rather than a tripod, to rest my lens as close to the ground as possible."

Peter finds plant photography more challenging than many other forms of nature photography, but raves about the enormous pleasure of capturing their beauty in a single image – even if it does mean getting up early in the morning.

Peter Lilja's top plant portrait photography tips



Harebells in evening light, Sweden.

1 Think in colour

Understanding colour is important in plant photography. Primary colours (red, blue and yellow) have the greatest visual impact, but mixing these with certain secondary colours (eg red-green, blue-orange or yellow-purple) can make each hue even more intense. Contrasting colours add a feeling of depth – warm colours appear to advance while cool colours recede.



Hoar-frosted leaves on a dog rose, Sweden.

2 Think graphically

Plant photography also requires a basic understanding of design. Study photographs taken by other photographers and look for a 'rhythm' formed by lines in the composition. Diagonals, wavy lines, zigzags and radiating lines, for example, all create strong images with power and energy. Lines can also be used to generate a feeling of depth.

YOUR STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE...

Mark Carwardine shows you how to apply the theory to get the perfect picture.

1 LIGHT UP



Peter Lilja

- » **The best light** for photographing plants is a bright but overcast day or as the sun rises and sets. Twilight can also be good. If you are shooting under a cloudless midday sun (which tends to produce horribly harsh pictures with dark shadows), try using a large, neutral-coloured umbrella to provide shade and a matt-white reflector to bounce a little subdued light back onto your subject.
- » **Alternatively**, try photographing brightly coloured flowers (such as yellow ones) from below – they look striking against a blue sky.
- » **A polarising filter** will help to produce even richer colours.

2 BACK OFF



- » **Just because** it's possible to walk right up to a plant without it running away doesn't necessarily make a close approach the best way to take its picture. Sometimes it is better to stand back and use a 300mm, 400mm or even 500mm telephoto lens to compress the picture and throw the background completely out of focus. A long lens helps to eliminate background clutter and makes the main subject jump out of the photograph.
- » **The plant must** be in crisp focus for this to work, so experiment with different depths of field to get the balance exactly right.

3 MOVE AROUND



Peter Lilja

- » **Keep moving position** and shoot from the front, back and sides, as well as from above and below. Even a slight change in camera viewpoint can make a dramatic difference to the shot. Many plants are better photographed from ground level, but some experts carry a small stepladder into the field to get a bird's-eye view instead.
- » **Try shooting into the sun** to illuminate colourful, translucent leaves and petals and the furry edges of stems. Then look for shadows, especially early or late in the day, and consider including them in the composition, too.

4 GET WET



- » **Don't be put off** by bad weather. A little rain can turn an otherwise ordinary plant picture into something really special. Green leaves and colourful petals are often enriched after a shower, while water droplets can add extra sparkle.
- » **Be careful when focusing** in extreme close-up – if you have to sacrifice one over the other, go for foreground sharpness. The eye needs to travel into the picture without being distracted by out-of-focus obstacles, such as water droplets. You can buy an expensive waterproof cover or use a shower cap to keep your camera dry.



ESSENTIAL KIT... WINDSHIELD

Wind is the worst enemy of close-up plant photography. There's nothing more frustrating than watching your subject swaying about in the breeze. A collapsible reflector makes an excellent windshield (and is useful for filling in the shadows and reducing contrast), but any flat surface will do.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR:

» Anything that will block the wind – and, of course, something to hold it up.

CHEAPER ALTERNATIVES:

- » Make a windshield/reflector with white paper or aluminium foil wrapped around a sheet of cardboard (crinkle the aluminium first).
- » Nothing at all – in windy conditions, put the camera on a tripod, set a very slow shutter speed and try to get a blurry, more artistic and dreamlike image instead of a more traditional sharp one.

DOS & DON'TS

- » DO spend time searching for a plant in good condition – old or tattered specimens do not make great subjects.
- » DO wait for the right light.
- » DO carefully remove any dead insects, fallen leaves, tiny blades of grass, twigs or other bits of organic litter that are creeping into the shot and spoiling the composition.
- » DON'T pick wildflowers or prune around your subject.

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MASTERCLASS CHALLENGE UK...



The British Isles are blessed with a variety of plantlife at its best in May. Photographer **Lorne Gill** explains how to capture their beauty and sets our reader challenge.

Flower portraits

The perfect light for plant photography is an overcast but bright day, but you often have to combat blue skies and harsh sunshine. Construct a tent of diffuse material around your flower to soften the light and reveal its fine details, colour and form. Portraits work best when taken at the plant's level. Watch out for distracting backgrounds – move around till they improve.



Groups of flowers

The photographic challenge of a large group of plants is to simplify what could appear an unstructured, chaotic scene. One way to do this is to shoot from below to isolate the subject against the sky. Alternatively, use the quality of the light to emphasise particular parts of the scene. If it rains, use an umbrella or go out as soon as the rain stops to see plants at their best.



Mushrooms & toadstools

Many British fungus grow in dark, shady places, so you may need a tripod as the exposure time will be too long to hand-hold a camera. Another useful accessory is a reflector – this will bounce light onto the underside of the subject, lightening the shadows and revealing its delicate structure. Don't shoot too close – try to include some habitat in the picture.



Mosses & liverworts

Mosses and liverworts are easily overlooked, but they are worth more than a quick glance as they are like miniature landscapes with their varied colours and tree-like forms. Look for interesting shapes and contrasting colours to make an eye-catching shot. Try shooting from directly above, and sprays or splash water onto the moss to really make it sparkle.



MASTERCLASS READER PHOTO OF THE MONTH

Now it's your turn. Use all our experts' hints and tips to take a picture of a British flower in bloom, a group of flowers or a fungus, moss or liverwort out in May. Upload them on to our website and they could be published in *BBC Wildlife*.

HOW TO ENTER

Log on to www.bbcwildlifemagazine.com and click on Photo Masterclass, then follow the instructions to upload your images by 12 May.

RULES 1) The competition is open only to amateur photographers. 2) Up to two entries only per category. 3) Entry of a picture constitutes a grant to BBC Worldwide to publish it in all media. 4) Entries will be judged by *BBC Wildlife*. 5) The winning image will be published in the July issue. 6) No correspondence will be entered into and winners will not be notified. 7) Entries will not be accepted by post or email.



'WILD PLACES' WINNER: Robert Dunlop, Renfrewshire
We chose Robert's stunning picture of this small loch with wild stags at Drumrunie Lodge, near Ullapool, for its colour, composition and use of light. Many thanks to everyone who entered – we were very impressed by the standard. Visit our website (see left) to view other commended images.