

Capture the essence of plants and flowers

Some people think that because flowers are naturally considered beautiful, you just have to point your camera at them to get good photographs, but as Carol Sharp explains, there is far more involved in shooting them successfully

Flowers and plants are one of the most photographed subjects, thanks in part to the huge diversity of shapes and forms they have adopted to further their species. They are also accessible, don't have to be asked for permission and will stay in roughly the same position. However, it is not simply a case of snapping away: as with every other photographic genre it is your approach to the subject, and the light, composition and background that make the shot and reinforce the idea you are trying to convey. When I looked for somewhere

to market my images of plants and flowers more than 25 years ago, the only plant stock image libraries that existed were those that used the photographs for identification. They only accepted images taken front-on and in flat light, or shots of gardens with some closer 'straight' pictures of plants. There was definitely a gap in the market to showcase the few people who were experimenting creatively with flower photography, which is why I decided to set up Flowerphotos, a stock library of creative flower and plant images.

Below Golden clematis (*Clematis tangutica*).
Nikon D800 with 105mm f/2.8 lens, ISO 320,
1/250sec at f/8

Opposite (top) Pink double peony (*Paeonia lactiflora* 'Sarah Bernhardt').
Nikon D800 with 105mm f/2.8 lens, ISO 250,
1/30sec at f/3.2

Opposite (below) Sweet violet (*Viola odorata*).
Nikon D800 with 105mm f/2.8 lens, ISO 800,
1/250sec at f/3.5



KNOW YOUR SUBJECT

Throughout photography's history, people have approached flowers in a creative way, but the plants they shot were often extracted from their natural environment and treated as still life subjects, as in the work of photographers such as Imogen Cunningham and Robert Mapplethorpe. These photographers were concerned primarily with the aesthetics of the flower, and were not necessarily very informed or conscious about the plant world, or its relationship to humans. However, the deeper you look into a subject, the more it can reveal something that aligns with your take on the world. Does man's creation of hybrids that produce bigger, more colourful and showy blooms appeal to you, for example, or are you drawn to wild flowers that can survive in the harshest conditions and – when they thrive – are seen as 'weeds'?

Knowledge of plants is undoubtedly useful in this respect, but while it helps if you know something about a particular species that will support an idea you might be pursuing, you don't need to know the botanical names of each and every plant you photograph. Paying close attention to the plants you find interesting is much more important and you can discover a lot just by observing the way plants grow and their life cycle, between emerging from a seed to forming seeds of their own.



MORE THAN JUST A PLANT

As well as differences in their life cycle, there are obvious physical differences between species. Some plants are diminutive, while others grow to great heights; some flowers droop, while others thrust upwards and outwards into the world; some are delicate and soft, while others are rigid and resilient (the architectural shapes that garden designers are so fond of can be fascinating). I call these attributes the *gesture* of the plant, as they tell us something about its character.

The reason why snowdrops are often seen on sympathy cards, and sunflowers are celebratory is that they assume an anthropomorphic character, so we often identify their heads with our own – the snowdrop has its head down, so we immediately think it is shy or sad. Other flowers have attained character over time and through association; the red rose is entwined with romance and the daisy in a meadow conjures up a fresh, summery feeling. Emphasising these ideas evokes a feeling in the viewer that can enable them to identify with and be brought closer to the plant world. In doing so, it can perhaps also

give rise to some respect for these living beings without which we would be unable to survive.

As you spend time with plants and observe them you will also notice how certain states of their being evoke different moods for you, and in fact seem to reflect your state of mind. The way a flower is turned joyfully upwards to the sun will evoke a very different response to a dead leaf dangling by a single thread, for example, and I have found curled, dying or dead leaves remind me of the way very old people gradually bend over, shrivelling and shrinking as their life force seems to be leaving them.

Of course, we are looking out at the world through our own paradigm and inevitably project our mood or vision on to what we perceive. This is what makes the images personal, but it also means that we will see things that others do not perhaps immediately resonate with. This is where you have to use your photography skills to convey your message.

I have studied the lifecycle of plants through the seasons and use words to describe the four different stages. For example, in spring

I tend to have the word 'emerge' in my mind and will go out with the intent of finding images that best illustrate this – buds and shoots are the obvious choice. In autumn, when seed heads are forming, I look for examples of 'release', where the seeds are leaving the plant. The way that plants disperse seeds particularly resonates with me, as it also seems to express 'letting go'.

PRO TIPS

It is not only the flower that is potentially of interest. Other parts of a plant, such as enormous spikes or fluffy seed heads, can often be a lot more intriguing or dramatic. Plants change quickly, so keep going back to check on them; buds can open in a few hours and look quite different at each stage, while you might find the fluffy seed head you were about to shoot has suddenly blown off.

Having a mood in mind from the outset can help you to find that mood in your photographs. It is as if when you change the way you look at things, the things you look at also change.

EMPHASISE IT

Making the most of your subject involves a number of techniques, including (but not limited to) your viewpoint, focal length and lighting. Most plants don't grow much more than about knee high, but getting down to the height of the plant is the only way to get a nice profile shot. This can be awkward in someone's garden, as you might crush the surrounding plants if you kneel down; I find a little fisherman's stool works well, plus you don't get damp knees.

If you can get even lower, shooting from a low angle, looking up at your subject, is a great way of removing other plants in the background from the composition, although your seed head or flower may then be against the light and will appear too dark (or the background too bright) unless the sky is heavily overcast. To counter this, diffuse the sun with a piece of tracing paper or set up a large piece of translucent Perspex (which is better on a windy day), making sure it doesn't fall on your subject. Alternatively, use a piece of white card or board to reflect the light back on to your subject, angling it slightly from one side so it isn't bouncing back directly on to the subject and flattening shapes and texture.

PRO TIPS

Backlighting is my favourite light direction. With a dark background you often get a glowing edge around the subject that picks out delicate hairs and textures.

When it has been raining, backlighting gives lots of bokeh options, so try shooting through a plant with a long lens to get multiple layers of bokeh droplets.

Early morning or evening light (side-light) is best for describing texture and keeping colours saturated. Shoot with soft light; thin cloud cover prevents dark shadows, whereas direct sunlight can reflect off glossy leaves and lead to blown highlights.



Because I mostly shoot plant portraits I usually use a 105mm macro lens. This allows me to be far enough away so I'm not blocking the light falling on my subject, but close enough to reach out and hold or twist the stem if needed – just a little turn can make all the difference. However, because you are close to the subject you need to be aware of the clothes you are wearing: white and bright colours will reflect back on to your subject.

A very wide aperture will throw the background out of focus, and selective focus will accentuate a specific point, but check for distracting highlights, especially in the background. In a garden there will also be many different colours and when they're blurred they can really jump out from a

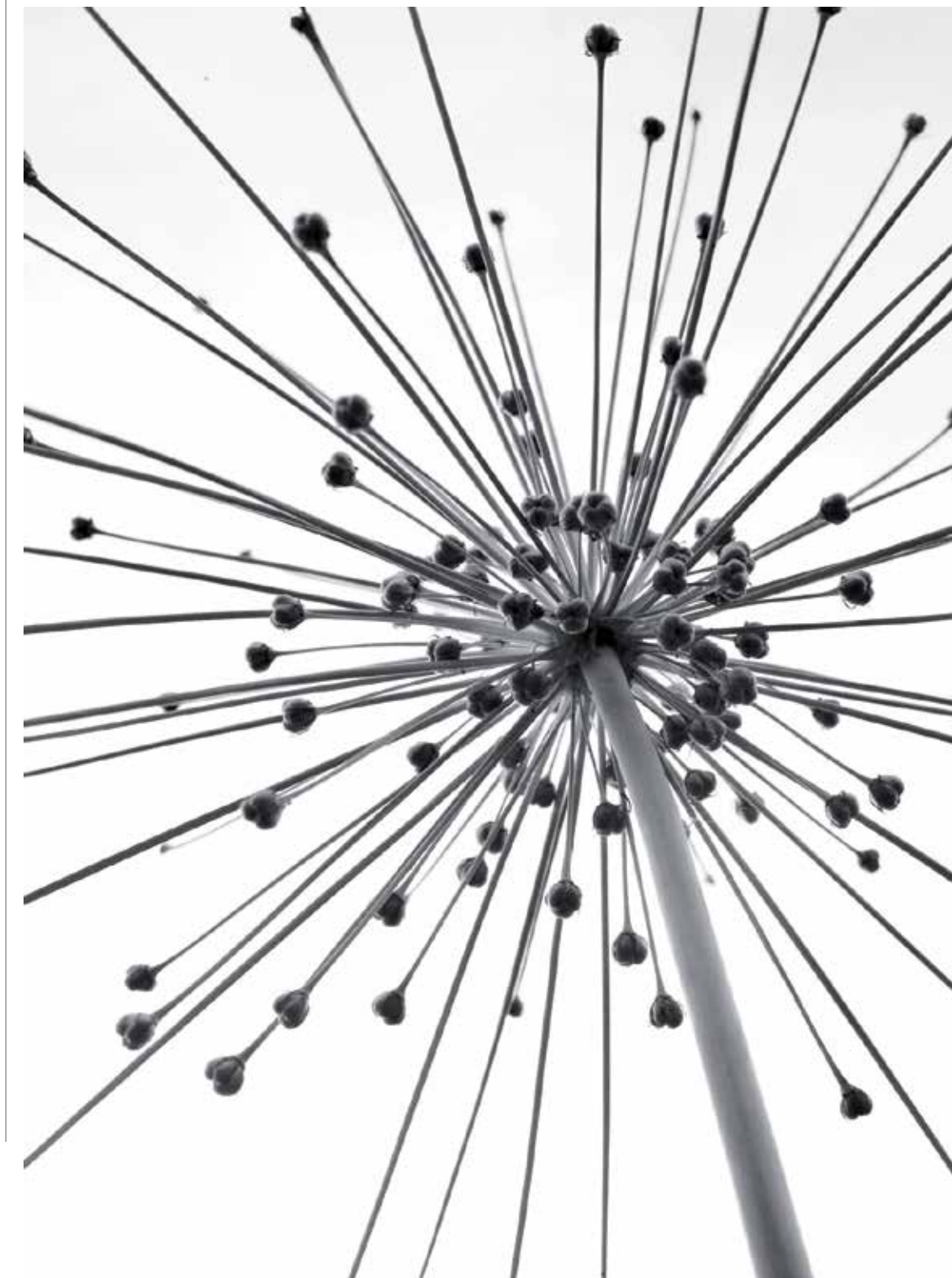
background. Moving yourself a little can often mean these areas are masked by the subject or moved out of frame, but if that doesn't work you can remove or desaturate them in post-production instead.

Opposite (left) Common snowdrop (Galanthus nivalis). Nikon D700 with 105mm f/2.8 lens, ISO 200, 1/1000sec at f/3.5

Opposite (right) Rosebay willowherb (Chamerion augustifolium). Nikon D700 with 105mm f/2.8 lens, ISO 200, 1/1000sec at f/3.5

Below (left) Willow (Salix alba – unknown variety). Nikon D800 with 70-300mm lens at 300mm, ISO 320, 1/250sec at f/8

Below (right) Schubert's allium (Allium schubertii). Nikon D700 with 24-85mm lens at 35mm, ISO 800, 1/160sec at f/5





PATTERN AND ABSTRACTION

One thing nature does well is pattern. The amazing structure of a sunflower seed head or the symmetry of a dahlia flower or a succulent are all accessible subjects, as are the backlit veins on leaves. Careful framing and soft light usually works best here, as does getting

parallel with the pattern and shooting fairly tight crops. As your camera will be relatively close to the subject, depth of field will be limited, so you will need a small aperture to obtain sharpness and may possibly need to use a tripod.

Pattern can also be found in multiple amounts

of a single item, such as mass flower plantings or multiple stalks or leaves. I try to look for visual rhythm here, but one or two that are breaking the ranks is more interesting than trying to find perfect order; this is what the Japanese call *wabi-sabi*.

As you concentrate on looking for patterns you are likely to start to see shapes that repeat themselves at different scales across nature; tree branch structures are repeated in the twig and the leaf (and in the root), for example. This also looks similar to our own veins and neural system, and was the inspiration behind my System series of images.

*Above Fern – unknown variety.
Nikon D200 with 18-70mm lens at 44mm,
ISO 250, 1/80sec at f/5.6*

*Left Opium poppy (Papaver somniferum).
Nikon D800 with 105mm, ISO 160, 1/250sec
at f/8*

PRO TIPS

Frost brings surprising effects, especially a hoar frost that reaches above ground and coats every detail. Seed heads can look amazing in these conditions.

Shooting in or converting to black & white helps to reinforce shapes.

Ambiguity helps the viewer bring his or her own concepts and feelings to the image.



CONNECTING TO NATURE

There is, of course, a lot of joy to be found in photographing nature. When we concentrate our attention on things that were not created by the human mind we can enter a Zen state, which is why we feel a sense of peace when we commune with nature.

The Indian philosopher, Krishnamurti, wrote: 'In ancient China before an artist began to paint anything – a tree, for instance – he would sit down in front of it for days, months, years. He did not identify himself with the tree but he was the tree. This means

that there was no space between him and the tree, no space between the observer and the observed, no experiencer experiencing the beauty, the movement, the shadow, the depth of a leaf, the quality of colour. He was totally the tree, and in that state only could he paint.'

Knowledge is useful, but if I am close to a plant that has drawn me to it and I am still for a moment, I don't call it anything, label it or analyse it. Instead, I enter a dimension of 'no thought', where I connect to nature

on a deep level and observe a plant with all my being, not just my mind. In that intensity I find there is no observer at all; there is only attention and a state of oneness with another unique living system. *Then* I lift up my camera.

*Below Bamboo – unknown variety.
Nikon D800 with 105mm lens, ISO 320,
1/1250sec at f/4*



STEPS FOR SUCCESS

On a bright day, wearing a white top will help bounce back some light when your subject is backlit. Portable LED lights are also great when you need a bit of fill light.

If you can't get the depth of field you want, shoot to create a focus-stacked image. Take multiple images from exactly the same position (a tripod is essential), moving the focus forward or back in tiny increments each time. You can combine your files using Photoshop or dedicated stacking software.

Use botanical illustrations to research plants. These illustrations show all the parts of a plant, including the seed heads.

Take something waterproof to kneel, sit or even lay on to get down to the plant's level; a bin bag will suffice.

The RHS has an online plant finder (rhs.org.uk/plants) where you can find suppliers across the UK for every single species of plant. It is also the most up-to-date record of the correct names for garden plants.

Most large botanical gardens display the names of plants next to the plant itself. Take a quick snap before or after your main shots so you have the name as a reference.

If the botanical side of things seems daunting, try reading the work of nature writers such as Richard Mabey and Robert McFarlane.

Be present. Turn off your phone and engage with the plants. If you are open and undistracted you will find meaning and a deeper experience.

GROW YOUR OWN

Observe where the sun hits your garden and where it is shaded; note how it is different in autumn and winter when the sun is lower. Use this to guide your planting plans.

Put your best plants in a position in the garden where there is nothing distracting in the background.

Don't make new borders too deep and think about creating island beds where you can photograph from all sides. Leave space for your tripod between the beds.

Raised beds offer good access to smaller plants.

It is often better to have plants in pots that you can move around. I usually photograph the plants I buy in the pots before I plant them, so I can experiment with putting them in different places and light situations.

Keep plant labels so you can identify the plant; this information will be required if you submit your images to a stock library.

Don't tidy too much in the autumn. Leave seed heads and even flowers that haven't quite opened, as they can look great in frost. Don't cut ornamental grasses until spring, as they make superb subjects in winter, turning an oaty colour and moving in the wind. Try shooting through them for a layered look.

*Below Bronze fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare* 'Purpureum').
Nikon D800 with 70-300mm lens at 190mm, ISO 640,
1/500sec at f/4.8*

