

SPRING

Following winter comes the season that is favoured by many outdoor photographers. The arrival of spring sees the landscape burst into colour and new wildlife emerge, offering you the chance to capture this most tantalising of seasons in all its glory



Getting ready for spring

Your first step to creative focusing is to learn the principles behind AF systems and how the point of focus influences how a scene is captured

SPRING HERALDS AN EXPLOSION of colour and new life. It seems that everywhere you look, there is picture potential. In towns and parks, rows of daffodils and tulips are blooming. They look fantastic shot using a wide-angle lens, from a low angle, contrasted against a clear blue sky. If you wish to saturate colour even further, try attaching a polarising filter. Drive out into the countryside and freshly ploughed fields will be full of new shoots. This can prove very photogenic, with rows of young crops creating interesting patterns within the landscape. Often, they are best captured from a short distance away using a medium-length telephoto. Spring lambs are one of the iconic images of the season. While you shouldn't enter farmers' fields with livestock without prior permission, sheep are often friendly, curious animals. Therefore, you will normally be able to take good, frame-filling shots of lambs playing and resting using a telezoom.

Trees and woodland are some of the most popular springtime subjects. The classic springtime image is a carpet of bluebells. While it might be a cliché, surely no photographer can resist the lure of a bluebell wood. However, when photographing woodland, sunny days are best avoided. While the light of early morning and late afternoon is nicely diffused and photogenic, midday light creates too much contrast, and areas of bright light striking the woodland floor will overexpose part of the scene. Bright, overcast weather is normally better suited to woodland photography.

Colours appear naturally more saturated and it is far easier to achieve the right exposure. However, in overcast light, shutter speeds will be slow, so use a tripod or image stabilisation.

The weather plays a significant role in springtime photography. While it is best to wait for overcast light to shoot woodland, check the weather forecast regularly for impending clear, still evenings as this may signify mist. Get to your destination before sunrise, in time to set up in anticipation of the best light. Light in spring is often fantastic – the air is very clean and colour and clarity are good. The warmth and quality of early morning light will make you wonder why you ever wanted to stay in bed!

Don't be a fair-weather photographer. Spring is renowned for showers, but this can produce dramatic cloud, interesting lighting and, if you're lucky, a rainbow. A polarising filter helps intensify the colours of rainbows, but be careful when using one – the colours can disappear altogether if the filter is rotated incorrectly. Following rainfall, fresh shoots, unfurling leaves, flowers and blossom will be decorated with tiny water droplets – adding interest and scale to your close-up shots. Look for this type of fine detail and interest when taking pictures.

Spring also sees the emergence of insects, like butterflies, dragonflies and bees. They are easiest to photograph early in the morning, when they are still torpid. A macro lens is best for close-ups, but if you're new to close-up photography, close-up filters are an excellent and cost-effective introduction.

Setting up your digital SLR

1) WHITE BALANCE: You can rely on Auto White Balance (AWB) in most situations. However, it can be fooled if one colour dominates a scene, like a canopy of green leaves or carpet of bluebells. The Daylight White Balance preset is more stable in this type of situation. If you are shooting in Raw, achieving the right White Balance isn't so critical, as you can adjust colour temperature during processing.

2) ISO: If you are using a tripod, and slow shutter speeds aren't a concern, keep ISO low, at the camera's base setting. This will minimise image-degrading 'noise'. However, if you are shooting handheld in dull light, or need to freeze subject movement, don't be afraid to increase ISO in order to achieve a faster, more practical shutter speed.

3) EXPOSURE MODE: For most spring subjects, it is important photographers have full creative control over depth-of-field. Therefore, we recommend you opt for aperture-priority mode. In this semi-automatic exposure mode, the photographer selects the f/stop, while the camera sets the corresponding shutter speed. If you wish to generate front-to-back sharpness, opt for a small aperture, like f/16 or f/22. To create a shallow depth-of-focus, set a large aperture, like f/4.



Essential accessories

■ TRIPOD: We can't emphasise enough the importance of using a tripod. They provide stability and eliminate the risk of camera shake when shooting in low-light – woodland interiors, for instance. They also aid composition, allowing you to check, fine-tune and perfect your set-up. For under £100, you can buy an excellent tripod, from the likes of Manfrotto, Velbon or Giottos.

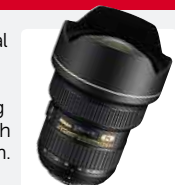


■ POLARISING FILTER: These can reduce or eliminate glare and reflections and are perfect for springtime photography. Rotate the filter in its mount until you remove the reflective sheen from foliage and petals. Doing so will restore a subject's natural vibrancy. These are great for general woodland scenes as well as plant and floral close-ups.

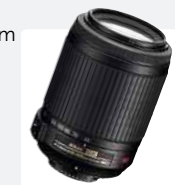


What lenses do I need?

■ WIDE-ANGLE: Essential for views of woodland interiors, large carpets of wild flowers and morning mist. Opt for a focal length in the region of 18-28mm. This will allow you to capture images with huge depth. Many wide-angles have a short minimum focusing distance, so it is possible to get close to foreground subjects – like an uncurling fern or bluebells – and make them appear larger or more prominent. Extreme wide-angles are great for distorting and stretching perspective.

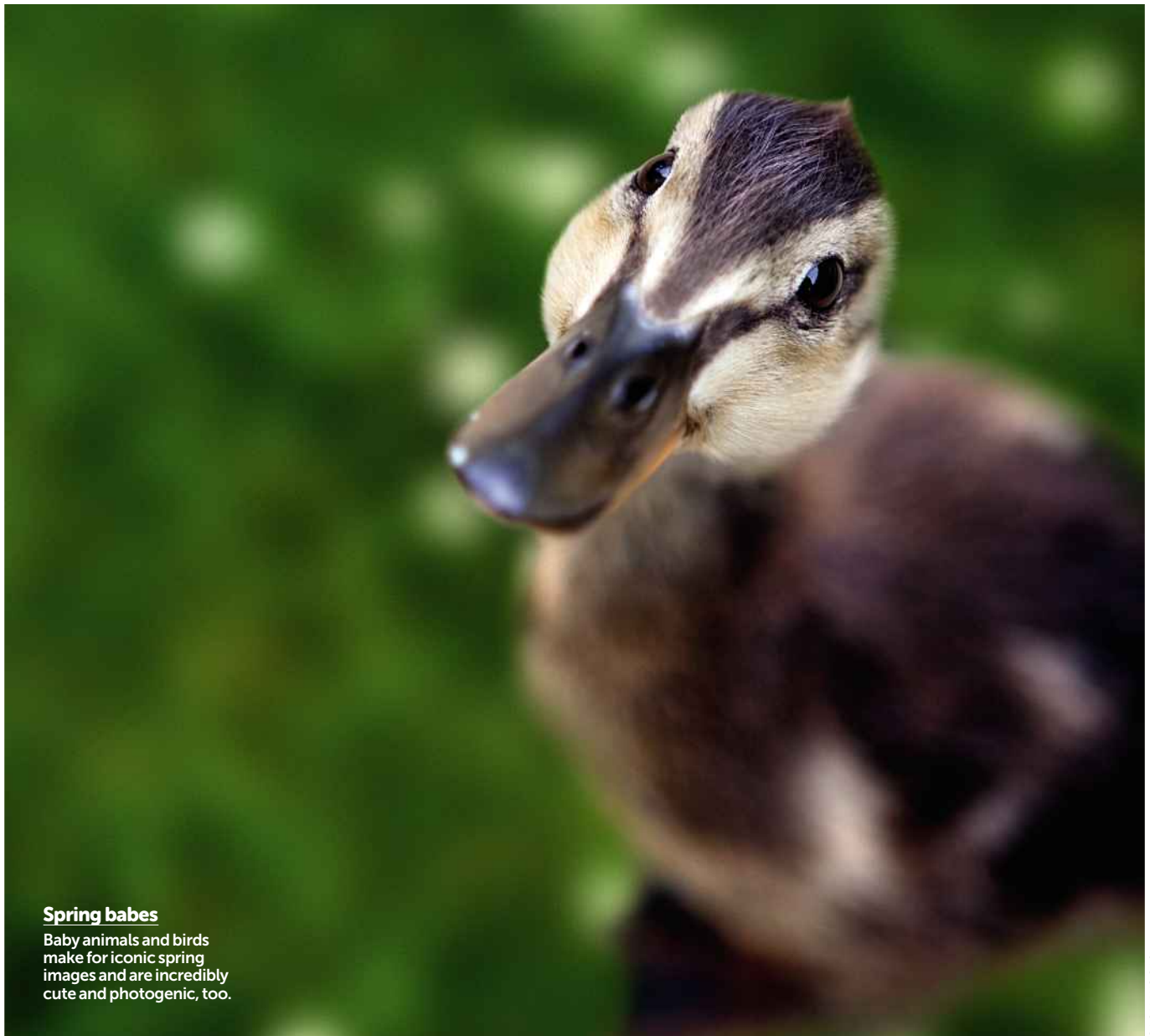


■ TELEZOOM: A telezoom is a great companion for spring due to its versatile range. A 70-300mm, for example, is capable of photographing such things as lambs from a field gateway, high-up spring leaves and backlit ferns. It is also ideal to photograph young animals, like ducklings and cygnets, from a distance that won't alarm the parents. Many telezooms also have a 'macro' facility, allowing you to get close enough to capture frame-filling shots of blossom, plants and even larger insects.



■ MACRO LENS: Spring is great for close-ups. To photograph smaller flowers, catkins, buds and wildlife, a close focusing lens is essential. A true macro offers 1:1 (life-size) reproduction and is available in different focal lengths. Lenses of 70mm or under are compact and lightweight, making them ideal for use handheld. Longer focal lengths, such as the 90mm macro, have a larger working distance, useful to shoot timid wildlife. If you can't afford a macro lens, buy a set of close-up filters.





Spring babes

Baby animals and birds make for iconic spring images and are incredibly cute and photogenic, too.

ISTOCK PHOTO

Ideas for great spring images



ROSS HODDINOTT

■ BACKLIT LEAVES

Try backlighting for vibrant foliage images that reveal the veins and intricacies of leaves and highlight shape and form. Backlighting can fool metering into underexposure, so check your histogram and apply between +1.5 to +2EV compensation if needed.



ROSS HODDINOTT

■ MORNING DEW

After a heavy dew, the landscape sparkles and glistens in the morning light. An early start is required, as dew soon evaporates. Look for tiny water droplets clinging onto grasses, leaves and flowers. Also look out for dew-covered webs for interesting close-ups.



ISTOCK PHOTO

■ LOOK UP

When photographing woodland in spring, the canopy of fresh, green leaves above is easily overlooked. Lie on your back and, using a wide-angle lens, shoot directly upward. Vertical tree trunks converge and perspective is distorted, creating unusual, eye-catching spring images.



HELEN DIXON

■ USE A LONG EXPOSURE

Photographers often favour still days for woodland photography, but you can capture great results in wind. Using a long exposure of several seconds and a small aperture, moving leaves and flowers will blur attractively. A tripod is an essential accessory.



ROSS HODDINOTT

■ GET DOWN LOW

A low perspective creates natural-looking results, particularly when shooting flowers. It also allows you to place more distance between your subject and its backdrop, helping it stand out. If you intend lying down, carry a groundsheet to avoid getting damp.

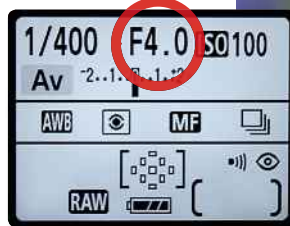
Spring flower power!

The vibrant colours of spring flowers make them ideal subjects for you to shoot

WHEN PHOTOGRAPHING FLOWERS in spring, there are a number of accessories that can make your whole experience easier and more enjoyable. A decent tripod that allows for low-level shooting is an advantage as it helps with composition and allow you to shoot at slower shutter speeds. We'd recommend that you use a polarising filter to bring out the vivid colours of the flowers, reduce glare on wet foliage and deepen the blues of the sky.

Understanding depth-of-field is essential when shooting flower close-ups. Try using a macro lens with a wide aperture to limit the depth-of-field and emphasise the main subject. This will allow you to focus on a specific point of interest, blurring out anything that is not on the focal plane.

If you want to add a bit more interest and texture to your flower shots, try shooting them first thing in the morning, when they are covered in dew, or during light rainfall. See below for tips on how to recreate a spring shower! Why not give yourself a head start for next spring by planting bulbs in your garden? A great resource for locating plants to buy for your garden is the Royal Horticultural Society's plant selector. This gives detailed information about when to buy and plant your flowers and how to look after them! For details, visit: www.rhs.org.uk/rhsplantselector/index.aspx



HELEN DIXON



ABOVE: A typical set-up for a flower shot, showing a Wimberley Plamp, holding the white reflector in place.

Essential flower kit

■ **TRIPOD** A tripod will keep your camera steady, reducing camera-shake. It will also allow you to manually focus more easily with a macro lens.

■ **LENS** A macro lens such as the Sigma 150mm f/2.8 Macro EX DG HSM is the perfect accessory for catching close-ups of your favourite flowers.

■ **REFLECTOR** A reflector will allow you to bounce light from your backlit subjects into the darker areas of your flowers, revealing the intricate details.

■ **PLAMP** Ideal for holding a reflector in place while you take the shot, or even the flowers themselves, the Wimberley Plamp is a great piece of kit that offers great value!



Top five spring flowers

1) DAFFODILS These characteristic yellow flowers can be found all over the UK. Look in private gardens, parks and just about every florist across the nation!



2) BLUEBELLS Usually found in woodland, heath, and occasionally on mountain tops. Read page 74 in this magbook for further information.



3) WOOD ANEMONE This common flower can be found in woodland between March and May. Growing in 'carpets', it can be identified by its long stem and three-sectioned leaves. The flowers are a beautiful pinkish-white colour.



4) RHODODENDRONS These can be found in woodland, and many gardens. One of the UK's most stunning rhododendron walks can be found at Bowood House in Wiltshire. Visit: www.bowood-house.co.uk



5) PINK THRIFT This colourful flower can be seen throughout spring, and grows in dense carpets. It has a distinctive look, with its many pink 'heads' growing on stalks. It is commonly found on the UK's coastlines until Autumn.



April showers!

April is notorious for its sudden and sporadic showers, but if you're trying to take a seasonal shot and the rain is nowhere to be seen, why not fake it? Simply spraying water up into the air near your subjects should be enough to add the 'English weather' look. The water drops add interest to the flowers, while the 'rain' falling will remind everyone of the great British springtime.

RIGHT: Using a remote release and a fast shutter speed, Helen managed to capture 'raindrops' falling onto the daffodils. Simple but effective!



 **Botanical gardens**

Why not visit your local botanical gardens? They usually offer an incredible range of plants and flowers to photograph. Check first to make sure that they allow photography!



Polariser punch!

A polarising filter, such as the one pictured here, will really bring out your spring shots. The filter deepens the blue of the sky as well as the yellow of the daffodil. It also adds punch to the details of the flower's petals as well as the clouds. Remember that polarising filters are at their most effective when used at a 90° angle relative to the position of the sun. The Hoya Super Pro1 Circular Polarising Filter is one of the most popular on the market.

The beauty of bad weather

Spring offers the landscape photographer some of the most dramatic skies of the year, with storms, rainbows and moody cloud formations

SPRING IS THE IDEAL time for outdoor photographers to capture spectacular scenes. This is the season in which you will see dark, foreboding clouds looming over beautifully bright foregrounds. The unpredictable nature of this weather means you will probably find yourself waiting around for breaks in the weather, but use this time well by thinking about the composition of your images before these 'breaks', as when they come, they don't usually last for more than a few minutes at most.

It can initially be quite tricky to get the exposure right in scenes of high contrast, so if there is a dark sky with a bright foreground, set your camera to spot metering or, if it doesn't have it, partial/selective metering should get the job done. Expose for the mid-brightest parts of the sky – this will prevent overexposure, and add to the mood, bringing out the dark skies and cloud details. Your DSLR should allow you to lock the exposure and recompose by holding the shutter button halfway down and recomposing, or alternatively press the AE-L (Auto Exposure Lock) button. We'd also recommend that you bracket your shots, to give you the best chance of capturing the scene at its best.

You'll find that a weak Neutral Density graduate filter can help add to the mood and atmosphere of the scene by helping make the clouds appear a little darker compared to the landscape. We'd recommend you try a 0.3ND graduate or even a 0.6ND graduate.



ABOVE: Use a 0.3ND or 0.6ND graduate filter to darken skies while leaving the landscape untouched.

RIGHT: When framing the scene, look to include interesting foreground detail.

BELOW: The reflection of the sky in the water adds an extra dimension to the scene.



ROSS HODDINOTT



Storm survival guide

■ PROTECT YOURSELF AND YOUR GEAR!

The wet conditions mean that unless you are properly equipped, you risk damaging your kit as well as catching a chill, too. Make sure that you are dressed in several layers of warm clothing, with waterproof boots, especially if you're shooting coastal scenes. Many photo backpacks have pull-out all-weather covers, which may be necessary in these conditions. There are several options for protecting your DSLR, such as the Optech 'Rainsleeve' – a pack of two costs just £5! Make sure that you pack lens cloths and towels, and you might also want to take a change of clothing, just in case!





Met office forecast
 Check your local weather forecast, as the weather can change very quickly at this time of year. The Met Office website can provide you with all the information you need. Visit: www.metoffice.gov.uk

ROSS HODDINOTT

Chasing rainbows

There is no time like spring for shooting rainbows. When you see dark rainclouds hovering above brightly lit landscapes, there's a good chance that you'll also see a rainbow. Bracket your shots to give you the best chance of capturing the bands of colour at their best. You could combine these later in Photoshop to create an image with an extended range, which will allow you a greater degree of control over the details, colours and textures of the final image. Finally, a polarising filter will add contrast to the scene, as well as saturating the colours.



ADAM BURTON



AUTOEXPOSURE BRACKET: Use AEB to shoot a sequence of three images at slightly different exposures to increase the chance of getting the best result.

RAINBOWS: Shoot in Raw, as it allows you to tweak the exposure and colours on your computer.

An hour at the farm

Daniel Lezano heads down to his local farm to see how easy it is to photograph some newborn lambs

AFTER A TRIP to my local farm, I can understand why so many people are vegetarian. Getting up close to some cuddly newborn lambs made me feel more than a little guilty about my monthly treat, a lamb tikka jalfrezi. But, like the true professional I am, I pushed these tasty thoughts to the back of my mind and concentrated on the job at hand, shooting some nice images of these woolly wonders for this Shoot The Seasons guide. I headed to Sacrewell Farm, near Wansford in Lincolnshire, a public-friendly farm where lambs had been born just days previously. I'd checked with them that it was okay to take pictures before making the journey (I advise you do the same) and headed there late morning on an overcast day with a DSLR and an assortment of lenses covering most focal lengths.

My first stop was a shed in which a group of orphan lambs was housed. While this had the advantage of allowing me to get close to the animals, the lighting was very poor. As well as very low ambient light levels, the heating lamps gave a strong colour cast that also produced really unflattering light.

Shooting in Raw, I knew the White Balance wasn't a real problem, but the position of the heating lamp meant finding decent lighting was nigh on impossible, so I settled on finding a viewpoint where the bright hotspot fell behind the head of the lamb, creating a bright halo behind it.

Fortunately, I was given permission to enter a field where two ewes and their lambs were grazing. Before heading there, I bought a couple of pots of food from the farm shop as I thought a stranger bearing gifts might have more success than one simply wielding a DSLR. As I discovered, my theory was right. Once through the gate and approaching the sheep, they instinctively started to trot away. A few loud shakes of the pots stopped them in their tracks and caught their attention. Approaching slowly, I allowed the ewes to feast on the food and they were soon far more settled. I took some shots of the lamb with the 70-200mm and 100mm macro lenses, but wasn't happy with the results, which were pretty run of the mill. However, things changed when I lay on the grass so I was below their eye level. This instantly put them more at ease and after a couple of minutes the ewes sat down, which gave a fresh perspective to the shots. With the mothers relaxed, the lambs soon came closer, sniffing at my clothes and camera as I rattled through the frames. I found that, working at such close quarters, the 16-35mm and 28-70mm zooms proved most useful. Moving around slowly, I was able to shift from ewe to lamb and found that their nervousness had given way to inquisitiveness. Often, I'd hold the ultra-wide zoom close to their face and found they'd stick their wet noses onto the optics, rather than pull away. Having a lens cloth in my pocket was essential to remove the smears! While I started with the 28-70mm at the widest setting, a quick look at the LCD monitor showed that the sheep was far too small in the frame. Setting the lens to around 35mm gave better results, with the sheep fairly prominent, but with enough moody sky above it to add extra interest.

I left the field happy that I'd captured some good images. I was also grateful that I hadn't dressed particularly smartly. Completely focused on shooting the sheep, I hadn't noticed that while shifting on the grass from sheep to sheep, I'd managed to crawl through several rather wet 'deposits'. On getting home, the clothes were in the washing machine long before the images were downloaded to the computer! If you decide to try shooting some farm animals for yourself, remember the golden rules: get permission, take a selection of lenses and a cloth, and above all, wear scruffy clothes!



TOP: The orphan shed allowed close access to the animals, but the lighting from the heat lamps made taking decent pictures pretty much impossible.

ABOVE: It took a few minutes for the sheep to relax, but once they did, they were quite happy to have me in close quarters.

RIGHT & BELOW: Adopting a very low viewpoint and then shooting with a moderate wide-angle setting gave by far the best results.





Final image

Once the ewes settled, the lambs became bolder. A low viewpoint allowed me to include the dark, moody sky.

FLORA

It is hardly surprising that plant life is so popular among photographers. Wildflowers, plants and fungi are varied, beautiful and easily accessible subjects for everyone. Regardless of where you live, or the equipment you own, great nature scenes are well within your reach and can make for stunning images packed with colour

THE FLOW, COLOUR, DESIGN and delicacy of plants – flowering or non-flowering – make them a popular and rewarding photographic subject. In frame-filling close-up, photographers can highlight fine detail and colour; while from further away, plants can be shown in context with their surroundings. By adopting a shallow depth-of-field, or creatively using subject or camera motion, photographers are able to capture abstract or painterly results. Plants can be vibrant or dull, tall or low growing, form large carpets of colour, or be found growing singularly. Some have colourful, impressive blooms, while others, like fungi and lichen, don't flower at all. With such great variety and diversity within the natural world, there is never a risk of running out of inspiration.

As the seasons change, photographers are presented with fresh subjects and photo opportunities. During spring, new growth is everywhere. Visit woodlands, parks and gardens to discover delicately unfurling ferns, emerging leaves, swathes of bluebells and colourful blossom. During the summer months, the countryside is brimming with colour. Meadows nurture a wide array of wildflowers, while foxgloves and willowherb stand tall along hedgerows and banks. When summer gives way to autumn, foliage turns golden, the light softens and, while many plants stop flowering, the sudden emergence of weird and wonderfully shaped toadstools and fungi present new challenges for nature photographers to enjoy.

When you look at great nature images – for example, the work of German photographer Sandra Bartocha – they look stunningly effortless. However, great shots are rarely accidental. Although plants are static subjects – meaning photographers enjoy a great degree of control over the look of the final image – highlighting a plant's beauty, form and design in a single frame is still far from easy. In fact, in some respects, the level of control plant photographers have over their results just adds to the pressure to get things right – both technically and aesthetically. Simplicity is often key, while background choice and lighting are also particularly important when photographing plants. A clean, flattering backdrop, free of any distraction, will help your subject stand out boldly; while the light's quality and direction will dictate the image's mood and help highlight fine detail.

Plants, in all their many guises, provide great subject matter for photography. It is time to hone your photo skills and begin exploring the wonderful world of plants. Read on to learn how to shoot a variety of flora...

Working in the wind

Although plants are static subjects, they can be badly affected by the wind. Tall flowers are particularly prone to movement in breezy conditions, making it difficult to focus and compose images in natural light. Plant photography is best attempted in still conditions, with a wind speed below 10mph. However, it is not always possible to be this choosy. Light, intermittent winds won't create too many problems – just wait for a brief pause in the breeze before quickly fine-tuning focus and triggering the shutter. In windier conditions, consider only photographing sheltered subjects, or use an umbrella or windbreak. You can make your own windbreak using heavy, clear polythene held in position by aluminium rods. Alternatively, the Lastolite Cubelite will help shield small subjects and also diffuse harsh directional light. Another option is to use a Wimberley Plamp – a ball-and-socket segmented arm, with a clamp fixed at either end. One can fasten to your tripod leg, while the other holds your subject still. However, be careful not to damage plants when attaching the clamp to delicate flower stems.

Poppy power!

Who can ignore the impact of a field of red poppies? Make sure you're camera-ready when the countryside is in bloom this year.





Get the gear!

Nature photography requires a modest kit investment to capture the best results. Here we summarise the type of gear you need

WHILE SOME SUBJECTS require costly, specialist kit to photograph, nature photographers can get by with a comparatively basic set-up. While a good range of focal lengths will naturally give you greater options and flexibility, it's possible to get good results using just a standard zoom. However, most plant photographers will want to capture frame-filling close-ups of their subjects from time to time, so a macro lens or close-up attachment is high up on the list of priorities. Aside from lenses, a number of useful accessories, lighting aids and supports are available that will benefit your nature images.

Lenses for nature

■ **MACRO:** Being optimised for close focusing, a dedicated macro lens is an ideal choice for nature photography. They typically have a maximum reproduction ratio of 1:1 life-size and have a large maximum aperture – typically $f/2.8$ – which helps provide a bright viewfinder image to aid focusing and composition. A focal length longer than 70mm (ideally 100mm) is a good choice, as it provides a useful working distance.



■ **WIDE-ANGLE:** A wide focal length, in the region of 18-28mm, is ideal for showing plant life in context with its surrounding environment. By getting close to subjects, you can create unusual, distorted perspectives. Wide-angles are particularly useful when shooting from low angles looking upward, or views of vast swathes of flowers. Wide-angles naturally possess a large depth-of-field, making it possible to achieve front-to-back sharpness. For more extreme results, consider using a fisheye lens.



■ **TELEPHOTO/TELEZOOM:** Telephoto lengths – in the region of 200-300mm – are perfect for isolating single flowers. Combined with a large aperture, depth-of-field is shallow at longer lengths, so with the use of a telephoto it is possible to render one flower sharply against an attractively diffused backdrop. You don't need a fast, costly lens either – the telephoto end of a 70-300mm will suffice. Extension tubes can be useful to reduce a telephoto's minimum focusing distance, but they do restrict the light reaching the sensor.



Len accessories

■ **CLOSE-UP FILTERS:** You don't need a macro lens to get frame-filling shots – adapt a standard or zoom lens with a close-up filter. Available in a range of filter threads and strengths, they screw on to the front of your lens and act like a magnifying glass. A +3 or +4 dioptre is ideal for nature. Close-up filters can be bought individually, or in sets, and cost between £10-£20. They degrade image quality slightly, so for best results select a mid-range aperture in the region of $f/5.6$ or $f/8$.



■ **EXTENSION TUBES:** Auto extension tubes cost more than close-up filters, but, unlike filters, they don't affect optical quality. They are hollow tubes that fit between the camera and lens, reducing the lens's minimum focusing distance. Auto extension tubes retain all the camera's automatic functions. They are best used with short focal lengths, ie a standard 50mm lens. They don't generate a large working distance, though, so be prepared to work close to the subject.



Lighting aids

■ **REFLECTOR:** Small, collapsible reflectors are useful for reducing contrast and relieving shadows on plants. The reflector is positioned at an angle that bounces light onto the subject and the light's intensity can be altered by moving the reflector closer or further away. One of the biggest advantages of using a reflector is that you are able to see its effects instantly. Use a gold reflector for a warm light, the silver side for a cooler light and the white for a soft fill-in.



■ **FLASHGUN:** Light can be limited when working in close proximity to the subject and in shaded conditions. Therefore, a flashgun, or the camera's built-in unit, can be useful when shooting plant life. Flash will not only enable you to use a smaller aperture setting to improve your depth-of-field, it will also allow you to select a faster shutter speed – useful if your subject is being windswept. It is often best to shoot at a reduced output, or through a diffuser, if you want the results to look natural.





Get the lowdown!

Choosing the right gear for your requirements – in this case, choosing kit which will aid close-up photography and get you low to the ground – is essential for getting the results you want.

Nature kit Q&A

Q I struggle to look through the viewfinder when shooting plants from ground level. What can I do?

A Unless you own a camera with a vari-angle LCD – like the Nikon D5100 or Canon EOS 600D – shooting from low angles can prove awkward. Rather than having to lie flat on the ground and contort your body to peer through the viewfinder, buy a right-angle finder. This L-shaped attachment fits onto the eyepiece, allowing photographers to comfortably compose images at right angles to the camera's optical axis. Most marque brands have their own range of these attachments, so visit their websites for details and models.

Q Do you have any tips for maximising sharpness when shooting flowers?

A Firstly, always use a tripod whenever it is practical to do so. Also, avoid physically depressing the shutter button as the pressure of your finger can produce enough movement to introduce camera shake. Instead, trigger the shutter remotely – either using a remote device or your camera's self-timer facility. Finally, if your camera has a mirror lock-up facility, use it. By 'locking-up' the camera's reflex mirror prior to taking pictures, you eliminate the risk of internal vibrations or 'mirror slap' softening image quality.

Q I've heard polarisers are useful for plants, too. Is this true?

A Yes, it is. When rotated correctly, polarisers reduce glare and reflections from foliage, petals and shiny fungi. By using the filter, you can restore natural colour saturation and capture images with added vibrancy. However, polarisers do have a filter factor of around two stops, so shutter speed is lengthened as a result of using one. In good light or still conditions, this won't be a problem, but in low light or blowy weather, it might be impractical.

Q How can I avoid getting damp and grubby when photographing plants?

A Wear waterproof layers to protect your clothing when kneeling or lying on the ground or invest in a groundsheet. Consider the Linpix Photography Mat to help keep you clean and dry. Using garden kneeling pads is another good option. You should also think about wearing photographer's shooting gloves like those from Just Ltd (www.cameraclean.co.uk) to protect fingers and hands from thorns and nettles.

Tripods and alternative camera supports

■ **TRIPOD:** A good, solid tripod will give you support, stability and guarantee your pictures are sharp. It will also slow down the picture-taking process, making you think about composition and viewpoint. A tripod also assists with precise focusing, so you can fine-tune your point of focus. For nature, opt for one that can be positioned low to the ground. A design that lacks a centre column or one that can be positioned horizontally is a good option. A geared tripod head, like the Manfrotto 410 Junior, is the perfect choice for close-ups.



■ **BEANBAG:** Beanbags offer good support for your set-up when placed on the ground. The bag's filling naturally moulds around the camera and lens, and absorbs the majority of movement. When shooting at ground level – which nature photographers do regularly – they provide perfect camera support, being hassle-free and easy to arrange. For specialist photography beanbags, look at products provided by Wildlife Watching Supplies. A crumpled-up jumper or a fleece can also be used as a substitute beanbag.



■ **PLAMP:** A Wimberley Plamp opens up many more opportunities for nature photography, allowing you to shoot things you wouldn't normally be able to. Clamp one end of the Plamp to anything from your tripod to a tree branch, and use the other to grasp your subject – it's the perfect tool for steadying delicate plants or flowers if you're shooting in windy conditions. Costing around £30, it's a great investment that you'll find a number of uses for in the studio or out on location. A must-have accessory.



Focusing on flowers

Getting the right shot takes skill – and a little knowledge of lighting, depth-of-field, viewpoint and exposure control goes a long way



HELENDIXON

WILD OR CULTIVATED, plants and flowers grow in many different guises. But while they can vary greatly in size, shape, colour and appearance, most plants can be approached in much the same way photographically – for all kinds of plant life, the technique and way in which you light them is actually quite similar. Therefore, whether you visit a local park, public gardens, stately home, wild meadow, moorland, coastline or ancient woodland, our advice will ensure you return with incredible images time after time.

■ DEPTH-OF-FIELD

The aperture you select will have a large influence on how your nature images look. The size of the aperture greatly dictates the amount of depth-of-field – the zone of acceptable sharpness in front of, and behind, your point of focus. A wide aperture (small f/number) like f/4 produces a shallow depth-of-field, ideal if you wish to render background detail pleasantly out of focus. A narrow aperture (large f/number) like f/16 generates plenty of depth-of-field, which is best suited to images where you want the subject to be sharp throughout. It is important that you don't let your camera automatically control aperture selection, which would be the case if you were using program or shutter-priority mode. Instead, manually select apertures by using either your camera's aperture-priority or manual exposure mode.

Depth-of-field is also affected by the focal length of the lens and camera-to-subject distance, with the zone of sharpness appearing progressively shallower at longer focal lengths and at higher magnifications, as would be the case with a macro lens. Nature photographers will often have to contend with a limited depth-of-field, so focusing must be pinpoint accurate. A tripod will aid focusing, helping photographers to fine-tune and position their point of focus.



ROSSHOODNOTT

Lighting: You might think a sunny day provides the perfect conditions for nature photography, but the reverse is true. An overcast day, or shooting in the morning or evening, gives your flower shots better colour and detail as the light is softer and shouldn't cast harsh shadows.

When photographing plants – particularly in close-up – it is often better to switch to manual focusing to give you greater control. Admittedly, working with such a limited zone of sharpness can prove challenging, but you can also use it to your advantage. A shallow depth-of-field can be a useful creative and visual tool. Using a wide aperture, like f/2.8 or f/4, you can isolate your subject against a diffused backdrop – perfect for picking out a single flower from all the others growing around it. Arty or even abstract-looking results are possible by intentionally using wafer-thin depth-of-field to highlight small, interesting details – like a petal or stamen. There is no secret formula as to how much or how little depth-of-field is best for nature images. The trick is to experiment. Try different focal length and aperture combinations until you achieve the level of depth-of-field that suits your particular subject. Review results regularly on the LCD monitor and zoom into your images to scrutinise sharpness and depth-of-field. If your camera has a depth-of-field preview button, use it.

UK's best wildflowers



Bluebells: One of our best known and most photogenic wildflowers. They look good photographed solo or as part of a wide-angle view. They typically peak in the UK in the first week of May (see page 74 for a tutorial on how to shoot bluebells).



Thrift: During late April, thrift will carpet clifftops along the UK coastline. Bright and colourful, it creates ideal foreground interest for wide-angle coastal views.



Foxgloves: These wildflowers bloom in early summer. Their height makes them well-suited to being shot in vertical format and they look photogenic backlit by the evening sunshine.



Orchids: The UK is home to around 60 species of wild orchid. They enjoy a wide variety of habitats, so research species first. Try cropping in tight to isolate individual flowers.



Poppies: Poppies are summer flowers, thriving on neglected ground. They can grow in large numbers, creating great swathes of colour. Try shooting from a low angle or as part of a wider view.



HELENDIXON

■ LIGHTING

The light's quality and direction is a key ingredient for any nature image. Strong sunlight is often best avoided as it can be too harsh to capture the finest detail. While shadowless light might be considered dull and lifeless for some subjects, a bright but overcast day is perfect for flower or woodland photography. On days like this, the cloud cover simulates one huge softbox, producing beautiful, evenly lit results. In fact, in strong light, it can be worthwhile casting your subject in shade – using your shadow or an umbrella – to lower contrast and allow you to capture authentic colour and detail.

Generally speaking, overhead light is best avoided as it casts ugly shadows. However, you can relieve shadows by placing a reflector nearby or by using a small burst of fill-in flash. Traditionally, the best light is during early morning and evening, when it is naturally softer and warmer. The sun's low position casts longer shadows that accentuate shape and form – so it is well worth setting your alarm early and staying out late. Also, at either end of the day, the sun's low position makes it easier to shoot subjects in beautiful backlight.

Backlighting – when the principal light source is positioned behind the subject – is particularly well-suited to plants and flowers. It highlights the intricacy of translucent



Depth-of-field

Making flowers stand out against their setting is half the battle. Use a wide aperture to create a shallow depth-of-field.

subjects like leaves and petals, and places emphasis on shape, form and fine detail – like tiny hairs or prickles on flower stems. The drawback of shooting towards the light, however, is the risk of flare. Attach a lens hood or shield the front of the lens to help prevent flare and a reduction in contrast. Backlit subjects also tend to trouble metering systems, fooling the camera into underexposing results. While this is a benefit if you want to shoot silhouettes, if you don't it can spoil an image. Check your histogram regularly and increase the exposure by applying positive (+) exposure compensation.

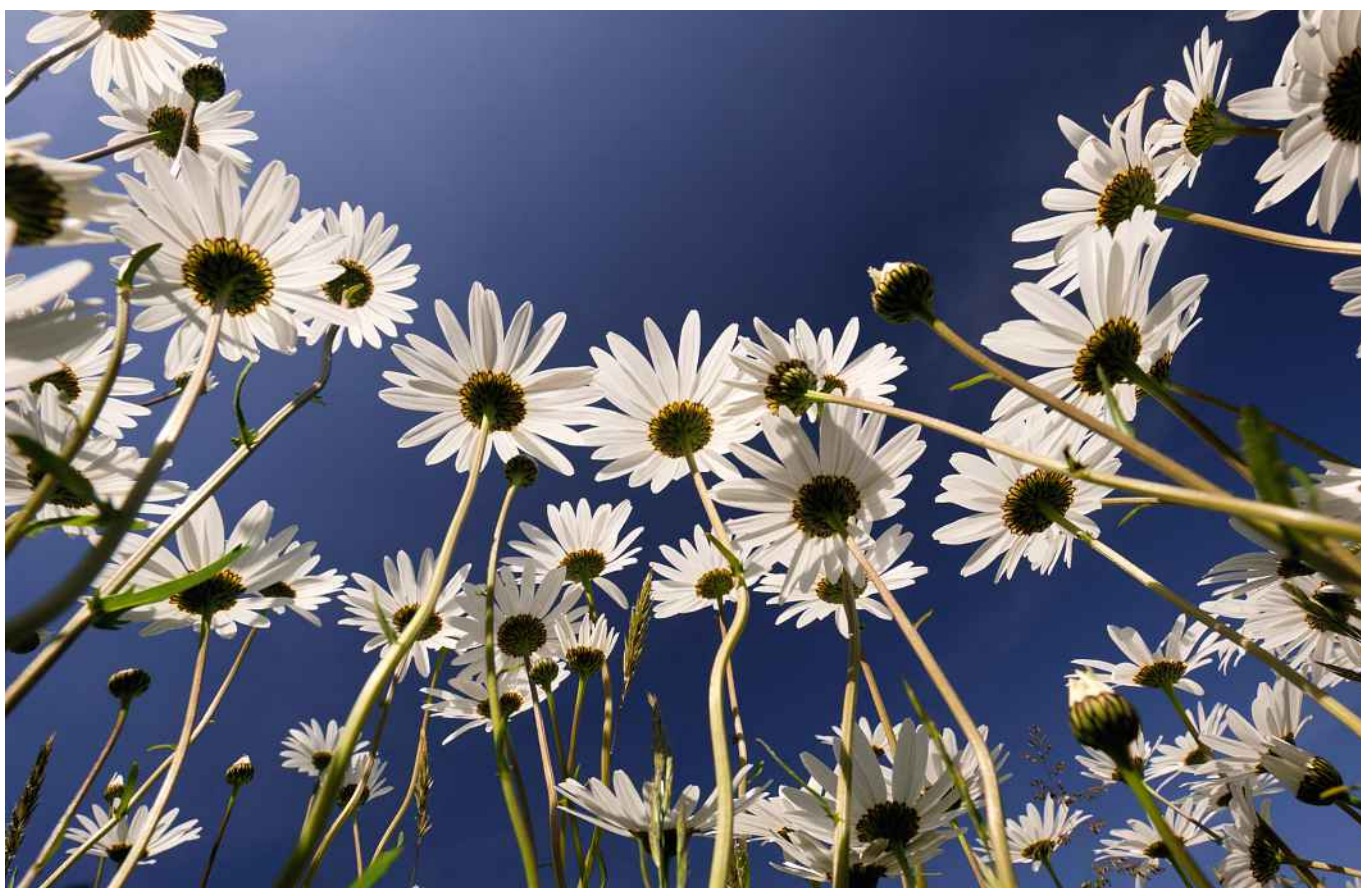
Lastly, don't overlook flash. If you don't have a reflector to hand, flash can fill in areas of distracting shadow. Shoot at a reduced output to ensure you retain the soft qualities of natural light. Flash can create ugly hotspots on reflective foliage or petals, though, so it is worth softening flash bursts. You can use anything for this from tissue paper to a flashgun's dedicated diffuser or third-party softbox. Flash can also be useful for simplifying a subject's background, as the fall-off in light can create a pure black backdrop if surrounding vegetation is outside the range of the burst. While the effect can look slightly unnatural, it can still be a more desirable option than capturing your subject against an ugly, distracting background.

Backgrounds & 'gardening'

It is easy to underestimate just how important a subject's background is and the overall effect it has. What you exclude from the frame is often just as important as what you include. Ugly background elements like partially out-of-focus highlights and distracting bits of vegetation draw the viewer's eye away from the subject. Peer through the viewfinder and explore the subject's surroundings. Distracting elements can often be excluded easily, either by changing viewpoint or using a larger aperture to create a shallower depth-of-field. It is often possible to remove distracting vegetation by gently flattening it by hand or using scissors – nature photographers call this 'gardening'. Keep a pair of scissors in your camera bag just for this purpose. Just be careful not to damage other flowers in the process.

When a subject's background is particularly messy, small tweaks are unlikely to suffice. In situations like this, an artificial background may be best. To create your own backdrops, spray different coloured paints onto a piece of card to simulate an out-of-focus backdrop, or simply photograph foliage – with your lens defocused – before printing the results at A3 or A4 size and attaching them to stiff card to create an authentic-looking artificial background. It's times like this that you may find a Wimberley Plamp particularly helpful.





ROS HODDINOTT

Water droplets

Tiny water droplets add scale, sparkle, depth and interest to your flora shots, so one of the best times to photograph nature is after rainfall or on dewy mornings. You can also create your own droplets using a gardener's spray or atomiser. Spray your subject from a short distance until droplets form. They will glisten attractively in the sunlight and also project a refracted image of the subject directly behind them. In fact, why not use a macro lens or close-up attachment and make the refracted image the focal point of your photo? Still conditions, a tripod and pinpoint focusing are a must. Keep depth-of-field as shallow as possible to ensure the background subject isn't too sharp. The best results will come from a careful set-up: spray a leaf or blade of grass so that droplets form, then align a colourful flower behind it – in a pot or vase – to produce the refracted image. Glycerine works better than water; its higher viscosity makes it more stable and it is less affected by evaporation. You can find it in eye drops and stain remover, or purchase food glycerine from health shops.



ISTOCKPHOTO

VIEWPOINT

A photographer's viewpoint has a significant bearing on the look of the final result, so select your shooting angle carefully. Nature photographers are often advised to shoot from a parallel angle, as this creates the most natural-looking perspective and will also help maximise the available depth-of-field. Certainly shooting at eye-level will work in many circumstances, producing engaging and intimate results. However, you should avoid getting in to the habit of always shooting at the same angle as your images will begin to look repetitive and you won't always capture the best result. Break out of your comfort zone and approach every subject with an open mind: don't be afraid to adopt a low or overhead viewpoint. An overhead shooting angle is particularly well-suited to relatively flat, open flowers – like ox-eye daisies, corn marigolds, roses and gerberas. Position your camera parallel overhead to maximise depth-of-field and crop in tight to fill the frame. Placing the subject centrally can work well in this instance, creating a feeling of symmetry. An overhead angle will also prove effective when you wish to emphasise a subject's texture or detail.

The shift in perspective caused by simply lowering or raising your camera angle can have a huge impact on pictures. When photographing subjects significantly above eye-view, the subject immediately looks smaller and less imposing. In contrast, when shot from a worm's-eye view, a subject appears to loom larger. A low viewpoint can look very striking when photographing flowers or fungi. Lie on the ground and point your camera upwards, or, alternatively, hold your camera close to the ground and use a right-angle finder or an articulated LCD to

Viewpoint: Shooting your subject from underneath gives a whole new dimension to your flower photographs, making your subjects appear taller and more imposing.

compose your shots. It is best to use a wide-angle or fisheye lens for the most striking results. Plants will appear artificially tall and imposing, while flowers will stand out boldly against the sky. If the sky is clear and blue, a polarising filter can saturate its colour further and give your shots added punch.

Your viewpoint has a significant impact on the strength of your composition, so always take a few moments to walk around your subject and explore the possibilities before deciding on your shooting angle.

CREATIVE BLUR

Who said you have to capture images of flowers sharply or realistically? Creativity is often what leads to original, stand-out nature images. Subject or camera blur can transform an otherwise ordinary shot into a Monet-like masterpiece. If flowers or foliage are being wind-blown, emphasise that movement rather than trying to freeze it. Set your camera to shutter-priority or manual exposure mode and select a slow shutter speed in the region of 1/2sec to intentionally blur your subject. This works well with bright, colourful flowers like poppies or tulips. You need to achieve just the right level of motion blur: too much and the subject won't be recognisable; too little and the level of movement won't appear to be deliberate.

The length of shutter you require will vary depending on the wind speed and the effect you desire. You'll need to employ trial and error – simply experiment with different shutter speeds. And, if necessary, attach a solid Neutral



HELEN DIXON

Creative blur: This is a fantastic technique if you get the level of motion blur spot on. It's a great way to add a feeling of movement and life to your nature photography.

Density (ND) filter to artificially lengthen the exposure time. A polarising filter will also lengthen your shutter speed by up to two stops, as well as intensify the sky.

Another fun and effective technique is to move or 'pan' the camera during exposure. This can work in close-up or when shooting a larger expanse of flowers – bluebells work well, for example. Simply move the camera while pressing the shutter to create beautiful, artistic streaks of colour and texture. Try moving the camera from top to bottom, or side to side. If you are using a lens with a tripod collar, you could even try rotating the camera in a circular motion.

Finally, if you are using a zoom, try a zoom burst. This is another simple technique, but results can look surreal and striking. Select a shutter speed long enough to allow you time to adjust the zoom from one extreme to the other during exposure, and zoom the lens smoothly for the best results. Again, this is a hit-and-miss technique and results won't be to everyone's taste. However, digital capture promotes this type of creative experimentation. It doesn't cost anything but time to try these things – and you might be surprised at how good the results appear.

Top five public gardens



■ **Kew Gardens:** Kew is the UK's most famous garden. There is never a shortage of beautiful subjects to shoot. The large glasshouses ensure you can take photos whatever the weather.
www.kew.org

■ **Lost Gardens of Heligan:** Located near St Austell in Cornwall, this spectacular garden fell into decline during the First World War. Restored to its former glory in the mid-90s.
www.heligan.com

■ **Wisley:** Wisley, in Surrey, is the Royal Horticultural Society's flagship garden. With rich borders, colourful rose gardens and a state-of-the-art glasshouse home to an impressive plant collection.
www.rhs.org.uk/Gardens/Wisley

■ **Eden Project:** Eden, in Cornwall, boasts the world's largest greenhouse. Its artificial biomes are home to plants from all around the world. You will find no shortage of picture potential here.
www.edenproject.com

■ **National Botanic Garden of Wales:** The gardens, in Carmarthenshire, are home to an amazing collection of over 8,000 different plant varieties, spread across 560 acres of beautiful countryside, as well as themed gardens.
www.gardenofwales.org.uk

Double exposures

By combining one sharp image with a second out-of-focus frame, it is possible to add a beautiful, dreamlike quality to your flower images. The effect is similar to using a soft-focus filter, producing ethereal-looking results that particularly suit images of backlit flowers. The technique relies on the use of a tripod, as both images need to be identically composed so they can overlap seamlessly.

Many DSLRs allow you to create a double exposure in-camera – with the camera combining the two images to produce a single file. Select the camera's multiple exposure setting via the camera's menu (check your camera's manual for details of how to do this), select a total of two frames and then take two images: one sharply focused and the other blurry. The amount you defocus the lens will affect the strength and look of the final result. It can take several attempts to get the right effect. However, not all cameras have a multiple exposure facility and you have limited control over the look of the final result when combining images in-camera. An alternative is to blend the images during processing, combining the images in layers. Doing so allows you greater control, as you can vary the strength of each frame. It is even possible to create a soft-focus effect using just one sharply focused image: simply create a copy of the photograph and add a degree of Gaussian blur to this layer before combining it with the original, sharp frame.



ROSS HODDINOTT

Water droplets

Daniel Lezano explains how adding water droplets to a subject can give visual interest to flower images

WITH SO MUCH rainfall in the UK, it's easy to understand why producing a guide to mimicking raindrops could be deemed a little odd. Unfortunately, most of our rain falls during the colder months when garden flowers are sparse, so when we are finally treated to a bout of fair weather in summer, the only way to photograph raindrops may be to create them ourselves.

This can easily be done using a water spray bottle, a watering can or garden hose. If you're using one of the latter two options, be sure that the nozzle has an attachment that sprays water, rather than one that provides a heavy stream that could damage delicate plants.

There are a number of different ways that droplets can settle on garden foliage, each providing the opportunity for a different type of image. One of the most popular is capturing droplets hanging off a stem, usually in groups of two or three. This is an effective technique that has an added dimension if there are flowers nearby that can be refracted in the droplets, as seen in the adjacent image. If you want to try this technique, choose a viewpoint that takes the backdrop into account. The other favoured image is a far simpler one, but equally pleasing, and requires you to cover the



ROSS HODDINOTT

surface of a leaf or petals with dozens of small droplets by spraying them with water.

For this step-by-step, I wanted to try a technique that I'd not seen before and that was to create a single droplet that rested on a flower, rather than hanging from it. My chosen flower was a purple allium, one of my favourites to photograph due to the intricate nature of its multi-flowered bloom. As I'll be moving around trying different angles, I'm shooting handheld and using a 100mm macro lens to help me get close. The bright sunlight

means avoiding camera shake won't be a problem, but the odd breeze means I need to keep shutter speeds relatively high to avoid blur caused by the subject's movement during the exposure. I use aperture-priority mode as I want to retain close control of depth-of-field.

One final point: droplets tend to form more easily and hold their cohesion better on humid days when there is more moisture in the air. Therefore, if a summer storm is brewing, head into the garden and you'll find this technique easier to achieve than on hot, dry days.



1 Apply the water Try applying a light dusting of water on the flower using a spray to see the effect it has. Unfortunately, for this technique, I find the spread of water is good, but the droplets are too small and not large enough in the frame. I need to find an alternative!



2 Experiment I try using a hose, but the result is the same. I decide I need to apply a larger drop with more control and attempt to do this using a straw dipped into a jar of water. By using my finger on the end of the straw, I do my best to control the release of water onto the allium.



3 Keep trying It takes a few attempts, but I eventually manage to settle a large droplet of water on a flower. It's proof that with a little patience and luck, the straw method can work. This particular droplet is too large, so I shake the allium and keep trying until I manage to do better.



4 Find your viewpoint It takes a few more attempts, but I have a droplet that is a more suitable size. Now it's a case of trying to find a good viewpoint and the best aperture setting. I start by shooting from above, but the result is flat, so I shift my position and look for alternatives.



5 Get eye-level with the subject Adopting a lower viewpoint gives the image more three-dimensionality and the droplet is clearly visible due to the shallow depth-of-field. However, the out-of-focus foreground is distracting and the dark backdrop is unattractive.



Final image

By shifting my position slightly higher, I've made a dramatic improvement to the composition. Not only does the subject now dominate the frame, the foreground is less cluttered and the green vegetation in the background is far more appealing. The aperture of f/8 provides the perfect amount of depth-of-field, too.