

Say it with flowers!

Flower photographer **Andy Small** shows you how get bloomin' great floral shots in your home, garden and wildflower fields



Andy Small

Andy Small is a nature, landscape and macro flower photographer. He runs flower photography workshops for the Royal Horticultural Society at RHS Wisley and gives talks on his work to clubs and societies. www.andysmall.co.uk

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uring the past year many photographers have had to resort to finding their inspiration much closer to home. This has not been an issue for me as, for the past 30 years, I have ceaselessly explored the photographic possibilities of my garden and surrounding hedgerows here in the Hampshire countryside.

As a fine-art photographer my underlying approach has always been to use my camera as creatively as possible, exploring ideas that echo my appreciation for other forms of art, such as painting and drawing.

Indeed, when I first started exhibiting my work in the 1990s many people couldn't believe that they were looking at photographs. I assured them that they were, especially as this was before the days of computers and I was, at the time, just using film and chemicals.

Using my garden and the hedgerows as inspiration means that I am never at a loss for photographic inspiration. I also knew, from the beginning, that I did not want my images to be purely descriptive, no matter how alluring the subject may be. So I was drawn to the more intimate plants, avoiding showy specimens. Seed heads, in particular, have always fascinated me and the different



Above: A dynamic complementary colour scheme and good use of positive and negative shapes, as well as strong diagonals, are key elements in this composition.

ways plants have developed to disperse their seeds.

I have used a variety of techniques and equipment over the years to help pursue my efforts to bring an artistic creativity to my images, including: wide-angle and macro lenses; panoramic views as well intimate details; infrared-converted cameras and different types of filters; and multiple-exposures and intentional camera movement. Over the next few pages I'll explain these techniques so that you can find inspiration close to home and shoot fantastic flora in your own back garden.

PLANT PORTRAITS

The approach to taking plant portraits shares certain similarities with those an artist might use when creating a portrait of a person, however, trying to capture a likeness of the subject is not necessarily the only aim of the artist.

With this in mind it helps to have an affinity with your subject. I am surrounded by nature in my garden and when I go walking around the fields near me. This gives me the opportunity

to really get to know the different characteristics of the local flowers and plants.

Spending time looking is time well spent. As a

photographic artist I try to make people aware of things they might not initially notice themselves.

Composition is key

Once I have decided on the aspects of my subject that I want to explore, my thoughts turn to how best to convey these in the final photograph. A great deal of the success of an image will be determined by the composition. This is basically the arrangement of visual elements within the frame, but its effect is so much more than this.

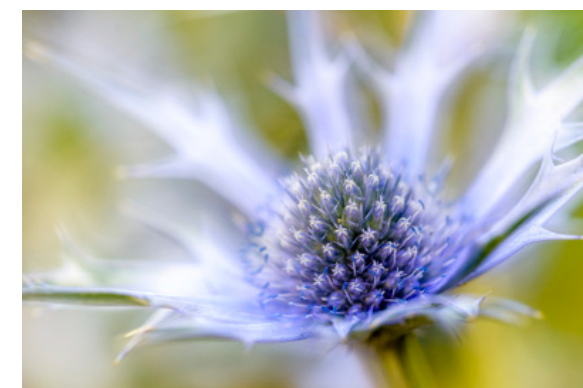
A successful composition can draw the viewer to what you want them to see and evoke differing emotional responses. There are a number of visual elements that we need to be aware of when composing our images and the list is subjective, but the following are what I consider to be key...

Repetitive motifs

As human beings we are inexorably drawn to patterns. It is the way we make sense of our world. We might already be doing this unconsciously in our images, but we can all use patterns to make our photographs more appealing. Patterns are everywhere and there is recent research to suggest that fractal patterns in nature have a beneficial affect on mental health. In photographing nature we are more than likely capturing fractal patterns. Using these in our images is another of the key visual element that we can use in our compositions.

Right: Repetitive motifs are helpful to engage the viewer and the square format suits the symmetry of the image.

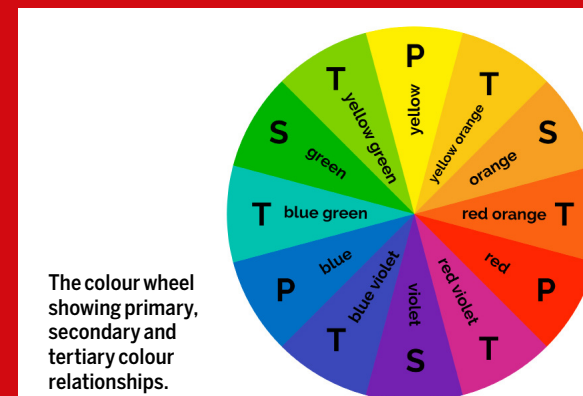
Below: Repeating motifs, a muted complementary colour scheme, positive and negative shapes and a rectangular format, where the main image is slightly offset from the centre allowing it to grow into the space, were all used here.



Positive and negative shapes

Giving the foreground and background equal prominence is one of my key messages in composition. Many people will see the subject of the photograph as all-important, however, in order to create a memorable picture, every part of the image needs to be as carefully and well thought out as the main subject.

By cropping the photograph of the poppies (top left) I have created new shapes in the background. These 'negative shapes' should be given as much consideration as the 'positive shapes' and their juxtaposition is crucial for the final look of the photograph. Whether an image is cropped or not, it is good practice to think of the main subject and background as working in tandem. →



The colour wheel showing primary, secondary and tertiary colour relationships.

Understanding colour

Out of all the visual elements colour is perhaps the most powerful in its ability to control emotional responses. Much research has been done to understand how colour can affect our moods. In order to understand colour schemes it is important to see how colours relate to each other.

As you can see in the simple colour wheel, each of the three primary colours has a secondary colour that is opposite it on the wheel. Red/green, yellow/violet and blue/orange. These are known as complementary colours, and using them together creates very dynamic colour schemes.

More common is to use analogous colours; these are groups of three colours that are adjacent to each other on the colour wheel. Using a small amount of the opposite complementary often enhances these colour schemes.



During the past 30 years of taking images indoors I have always used natural lighting – all that you need is a window



Square or rectangular format?

This is often determined by the subject and is something that can be decided later with cropping, but I prefer to do as much creative work in the camera as possible. Square formats usually work well for a symmetrical composition, whereas in a rectangular format it is usually a better idea to place the main subject slightly to one side.

STUDIO SHOTS

There are certain advantages to working indoors; control of lighting, lack of wind, isolating subjects and being creative with backgrounds are just some. Working indoors also allows us to explore ideas that would be difficult to achieve outside. Highlighting the different stages of the dandelion (below) is a good example of this. Having a garden means I have a plethora of subjects to hand, which I can pick and bring inside when I have ideas for images. For those who don't have access to this you could try visiting your local garden centre to find and purchase different specimens to work with.

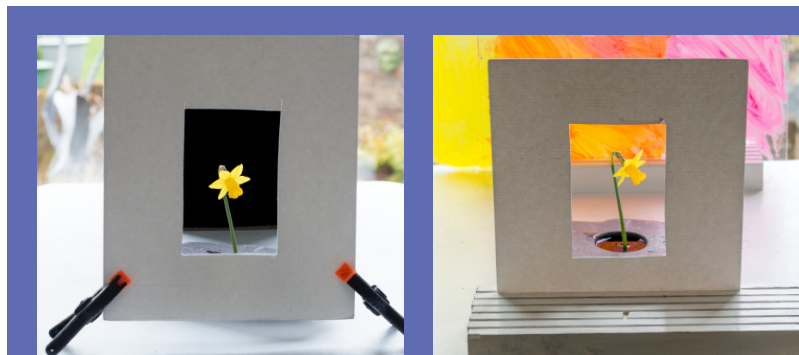
My studio setup relies on natural light and homemade props. I see it as an extension to working outdoors. It is a setup that anyone can achieve with the minimum of expense (see Studio setup, right).

Natural lighting

During the past 30 years of taking images indoors I have always used natural lighting – all that you need is a window. It is important for me to see the effects of the light when setting up the flowers and, in the early days, when flash was the only alternative, this seemed very artificial and too overpowering for my delicate subjects. Even now, with the introduction of LED lights, I still rely on my window for the best lighting.

Just like being outdoors the light from the window can vary so that, at some point during a sunny day, there will be direct sunshine and, on other days, a cool, even light pervades. As I am not working commercially this has never been a concern, but more of an advantage.

The window is positioned behind the studio setup, which means that all of my subjects are backlit. To me this is the most sympathetic lighting



Studio setup

This portable system is something I have been using for over 30 years. The requirements are to have a system for holding the backgrounds behind the subject and the reflectors in front of the subject.

I use a sheet of MDF as the base of my portable studio, to which I have attached batons to form a series of grooves. The glass backgrounds and reflectors can then be easily supported, while having more than one groove means I can stack one pane of glass in front of the other, if required.

Opposite top: Andy used a delicate approach to shooting this astrantia indoors using painted coloured backgrounds.

Bottom far left: Using a lightbox gave Andy a white background and the option to place the seeds where he wanted.

Below left: A subject should be placed as far away from the black box as possible to allow the light from the window to reach it.

Below: Each of the flower and the seed shots were taken with backlighting, white card reflectors and the black box. The arrangement was composed in Photoshop.

for delicate subjects, as not only does it enhance details of petals, for example, but also gives lovely highlights on things like stems.

Backlighting can produce silhouettes though, however this can be negated by the use of reflectors. These are simply pieces of white card that reflect more than enough light back onto the subject.

The black background

I have taken many images with a black background. This combination creates a very dramatic effect, especially with lighter-coloured flowers and seed heads. I use various cardboard boxes of differing sizes that are painted black inside. The back of the inside is covered with a non-reflective velvet. This, together with 'barn doors' on the box, means that I can create the ultimate pure black background. The white card reflectors can then be positioned in front of the subject using spring clips.

The coloured background

My studio set up also allows me to use different →





Camera mounted on a nodal slide for taking panoramas with a wide-angle lens.

Nodal slide

When you use the panning function on a tripod head to produce images for stitching into a panorama, parallax errors can be introduced. This is because the point of rotation is under the camera, so the view shifts as you rotate the head. To stop this, the point of rotation needs to be where the light rays diverge – the nodal point. A nodal slide sets your camera back, so the nodal point sits at the point of rotation. To use it, first ensure your camera is mounted vertically and remains level as you rotate it. Then choose a point in the foreground or middle distance you can line up with a point in the distance and rotate your camera to the left and see if the two points are still lined up at the edge of the frame, rotate to the right and check to see if the two points are still in line. If not move your camera backwards or forwards on the slide until they stay in line as you rotate the camera.



coloured backgrounds. After much testing I decided that using painted glass gave me the look I was after. The brushstrokes give a variegated look that adds interest and depth. I paint the glass with acrylic that can also be removed when dry with a Stanley knife blade. Due to the translucent nature of glass, using a mixture of two or three different coloured panels stacked together can produce some great effects.

SHOOTING OUTDOORS

While I can become engrossed in photographing subjects indoors, nothing beats being out in nature with my camera. As a photographer I consider myself very fortunate that, in the act of creating our artworks, we also experience being there as well.

One thing I have learnt through photographing outdoors is the benefit of being patient. Waiting for the light to be right or the wind to drop is certainly never a waste of time.

Top: A stitched panoramic image of a poppy field, using Andy's 15mm lens mounted on his nodal slide.

Above left: The sunset added to the drama of the row of silhouetted hogweed.

Above right: Hogweed taken with a wide-angle lens from underneath, offering the viewer unique perspective.

Keep an eye on the weather

Photographing outdoors is very dependant on the weather. This doesn't mean that I never venture out in anything inclement – far from it, in fact! It does mean, however, that the weather will influence the overall mood of your image.

Stay local

It can be an advantage to photograph a place you know well. I often walk the same paths every day and marvel at the rapid rate of growth in nature. Recently, I noticed the hedgerow of hogweed seed heads on my usual cycle route a few days before I took this picture (above left) and knew it would make a great subject. I decided to take the photo in the evening when the sun was setting, to silhouette them against a colourful sky. But, depending on the time of day and with different weather conditions, many other images could have been created.



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Wide-angle lenses

Working outside gives me the chance to use my wide-angle lenses that are rarely used when I am working indoors or in my garden. I have a 15mm prime lens, which fantastic, but my Nikon 24-70mm f/2.8G AF-S ED is my go-to standard lens. I used this lens set at 35mm and f/16 to photograph the hogweeds against the sunset.

One of the advantages of using a wide-angle lens is that it enables me to add context to the main subject, rather than isolating it as I would tend to do with my macro lenses.

Panoramic format

Sometimes taking a subject as a panoramic image is the best way to convey a scene, such as a marvellous field of poppies.

One of the first panoramic images I took was of the bark of a tree. Using my 100mm macro lens, I moved the camera up and down, taking pictures of different parts of the bark. When I finally stitched them together I could print an almost life-size image with amazing detail.

It is possible, when using lenses with a longer focal length like I used for the bark, to just mount the



Above: Shooting these seed heads in the snow helped Andy create the perfect white background to highlight the tracery of the teasels.

camera on the tripod and gradually move the camera to different parts of the subject in order to create your pictures for stitching.

However, I found that it wasn't as easy when attempting the same setup with my 15mm lens. This is because wide-angle lenses need to rotate around their nodal point in order to produce images that aren't affected by parallax and so can be stitched. The most cost-effective solution, for me, was to purchase a nodal slide. I used this setup to shoot the wonderful field of poppies (top left). ➔



Above: A Chinese lantern showing exquisite filigree – one of Andy's favourite subjects from his garden.

Bottom left: With a macro lens you can be drawn into another world, in this case a hedgerow of cow parsley.

Bottom right: This image is about colour and shape rather than the flower itself, but is it actually abstract?



MACRO CLOSE-UPS

One thing I could not have managed without is a macro lens. It was like opening a window into a new world when I bought my first macro lens 30 years ago, and I haven't stopped using it since. I am currently the proud owner of the superb Nikon AF 200mm f/4D IF-ED Micro that took all of the images on this page.

Most people's idea of macro photography will probably be an extremely detailed close-up picture of an insect or flower that has, perhaps, been even more pronounced by the heavy use of focus stacking. Whilst I will continue to take photos like this, it has become apparent to me that highly rendered detail is not always the most important thing I am looking for.

One reason I find my macro lens can be so engaging is that it shows me the world differently and in a way that is impossible for me to experience with human vision. Utilizing the shallow depth of field when using the lens with a wide aperture is something that I like to do, as it produces a very painterly-feel to an image and it is this quality that I find can be the most creative.

A different reality

A macro lens's ability to focus in on small details gives me the opportunity to produce images that could be seen as being somewhat abstract. This highlights an interesting debate on what an abstract picture actually is to people. In my view, these extreme close-ups aren't strictly abstract,

MACRO CLOSE-UPS



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A camera plate specifically designed for the D800E and a Gitzo Arca Swiss type quick release plate.



Above: One reason Andy enjoys using his macro lens is that it can show details that would otherwise be impossible to see, as in the case of this goat's beard seed head.

because they are depicting real objects and their reference is the natural world.

Another aspect that can be deceiving, when focusing closely on a subject, is the lack of reference to the scale of what is being depicted. This adds yet another layer of mystery to the image and helps to make it more challenging for the viewer as they are seeing things that are not normally seen.

Macro alternatives

Long before I purchased my first macro lens, I experimented with other less-expensive ways of focusing closer on a subject. This has become relevant again for me in my role as a photography course tutor. Not everyone that attends my classes on creative flower photography has a macro lens, so what are the alternatives?

My first foray into the macro world was to use a reversing ring; excellent quality at a reasonable cost. I also have extension tubes that are a great way of enabling a lens to focus extremely closely.

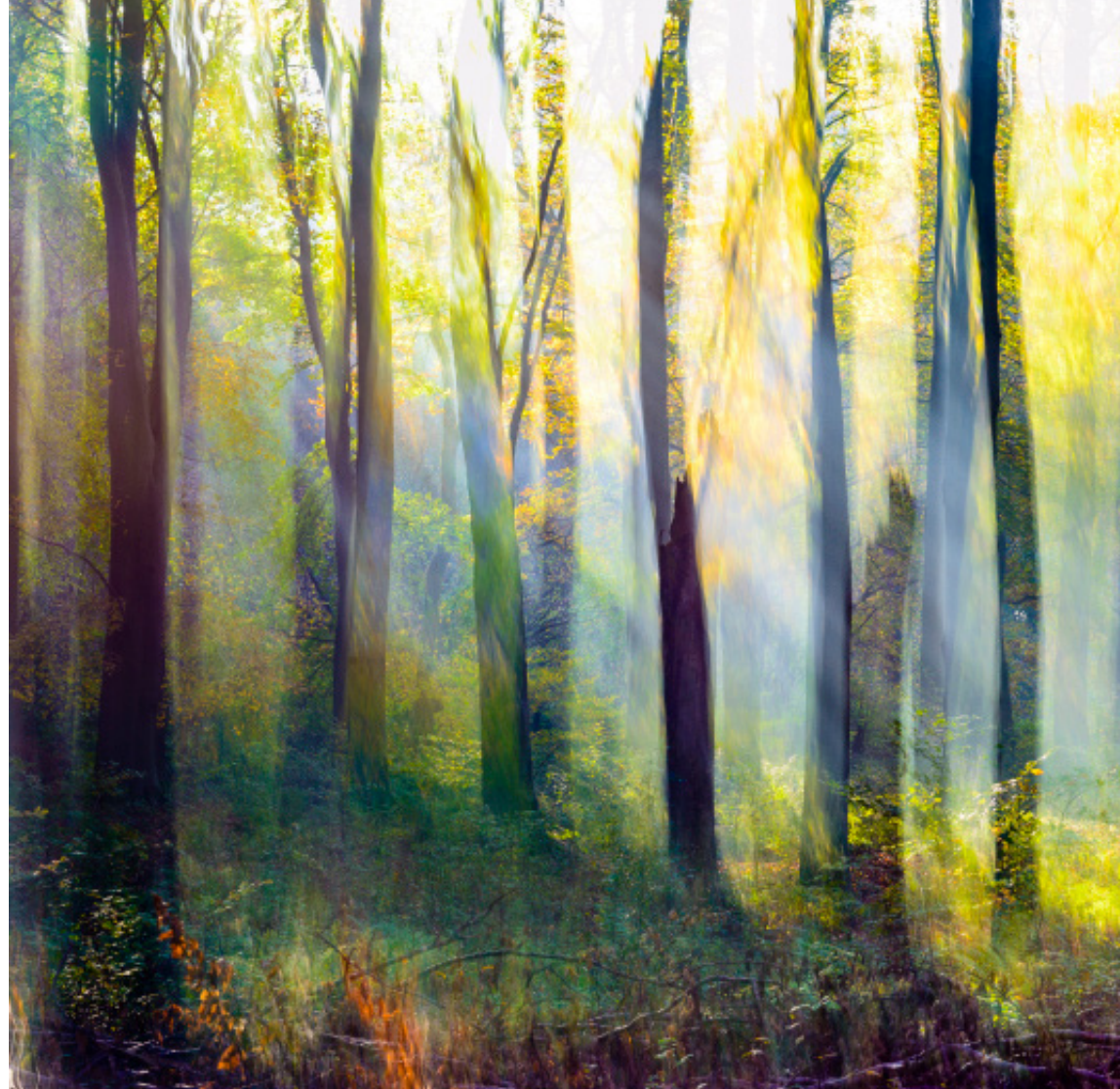
Tripods

One essential piece of equipment though that I hardly ever take a photograph without is a tripod. I have a couple of tripods: one is very lightweight and made of carbon fibre, which is comfortably portable; and another more substantial one for indoor use. I use a ball-and-socket joint for both, which I find to be the most versatile.

Apart from the obvious benefit of keeping the camera still, using a tripod also helps us to take our time and consider the subject more.

Steady shooting

Avoiding camera shake is critical when using a macro lens for close ups. To avoid this, I use my Nikon's Exposure Delay Mode. Speaking of which, I use a remote shutter release to avoid jolting the camera body as the shutter is pressed, or use the self-timer option. A sturdy tripod is a given. One thing I had to change was the tripod's quick-release plate that attached to my D800E. The rotating pin didn't seem to have anything to locate into and so its stability relied on how tightly it was screwed into the camera's base. This wasn't enough to stop the camera from slipping under gravity when positioned at certain angles. The solution was to invest in the Arca-Swiss system of a base plate for the camera and a clamp for the tripod head.



IMPRESSIONIST IMAGES

An impressionist approach has a great deal of appeal for me, as it affords me the opportunity to be the most creative with my camera. The idea is to convey an impressionistic response to the subject that results in the image looking more like a painting than a traditional photograph. There is a lot more emphasis on depicting movement, creating an atmosphere and the play of light, rather than having everything pin-sharp and conventionally well composed.

A lot of us have probably experimented with ND filters to blur movement in water and clouds, for example, and this was my starting point. There are many techniques that can be employed to create this style of photography, but what I use mainly are multiple exposures and intentional camera movement (ICM). Whilst it is possible to use Photoshop for this, it is important for me that, when I produce these pictures, all of the effects are done in-camera at the time of shooting. My D800E has the option for combining up to 10 different exposures in one frame, which can help massively.



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Above left: The allium and nigella were brought together by combining two exposures in-camera.

Above: A combination of ICM and multiple exposures were used to create this rather surreal image.

ICM and multiple exposures

In the image of the trees (above) I have used a small amount of ICM on one of the exposures whilst altering the camera's position for another two exposures. Although with experience it is possible to predict the outcome, the variables here make it difficult to know exactly what your final image will actually look like. This, for me, is the exciting part of the process, I have an idea of what I want the image to look like but it doesn't actually exist in reality. It is my completely unique creation.

Moving the lens

Being a large lens, my Nikon AF 200mm f/4D IF-ED Micro has its own tripod mount. This means that the lens and camera can be rotated 360 degrees within the mount bracket. Up to 10 different exposures can be made with my D800E, so by using all 10 quite a complicated image can be built up.

In the photo of the daisy (right) I have centred the lens on the middle of the flower. The petals appear whiter where the exposures overlap. Each different exposure can, of course, have different settings. There is also the possibility of using ICM whilst rotating the camera.

Create a scene

This is a technique I like to use a lot. It involves planning ahead to create a view that doesn't exist. In the case of the image with the purple allium and blue nigella (top left) both plants were in different parts of my garden. I wanted to combine them in one image. Taking the allium first, I had to leave a

Above right: Here, Andy moved the subject for each exposure, then combined them in his Nikon D800E.

Right: This daisy image was created with multiple exposures taken at set intervals whilst rotating the lens 360 degrees.



clear space where I wanted the nigella to be. It was then a case of moving the camera to shoot the Nigella, then combining both with my D800E.

Moving the subject

The technique of walking all around a subject taking photographs, and then combining all the shots in a multi-layered final image, has been popularized by the photographer Pep Ventosa. Working in a similar way I do the same thing indoors, not by moving myself but by moving the subject. This technique can be used to give a very painterly feel to the image. **N**

How to shoot multiple exposures

The settings for taking multiple exposures can be found in the Shooting menu. The number of shots you can combine depends on the model of Nikon camera you have, but for example's sake we're using the options from my Nikon D800E. First of all, you need to select one of the two options: On (series) or On (single photo). The (series) option will stay on until turned off again. Next up, select the number of exposures you want to take, from 2 to 10 with the D800E. Finally, select Auto gain On or Off. With Auto Gain On the camera will carry out the exposure calculations itself for the correct brightness in the composited image.

