

NPhoto APPRENTICE



Fine-art flowers

Our Apprentice gets creative with flower photography under the guidance of RHS tutor Andy Small

THE APPRENTICE
NAME: **John Fogarty**
CAMERA: **Nikon D750**

John, now retired, trained as a lawyer but has spent most of his career running a sporting goods business. His passion for photography began in the days of film, while in his teens, and was rekindled around 12 years ago when he invested in a D60 and joined Welwyn Garden City Photographic Club. He's since upgraded to a D750 and loves photographing nature up close, having invested in a Sigma 105mm f/2.8 Macro lens, and was keen to learn how to give his shots an arty edge.

THE PRO
NAME: **Andy Small**
CAMERA: **Nikon D800E**

Andy was an artist before he became a photographer, and his time spent painting and drawing has had a profound influence on his photography, with his 'painterly' style earning him the distinction of being one of the UK's most original flower photographers. Since he and his wife designed their first garden, flowers and plants have become the inspiration for his art, their prolific cottage garden providing him with most of his subjects. He runs flower photography workshops for the Royal Horticultural Society, gives talks on his photography to clubs and societies, and sells his prints and canvases to order. www.andysmall.co.uk



When our Apprentice John arrived at his destination in the village of Cliddesden, in rural Hampshire, he was greeted with an elbow-shake. Photographic studios had only just been given the green light to open after months of lockdown, and in this case the studio was photographic artist Andy Small's kitchen, with patio doors thrown open to his picturesque country garden. Set upon a small table in front of the open doors was Andy's home-built tabletop studio, constructed from slotted panels of MDF atop a large wooden board, all painted white to reflect the maximum amount of light. "As you'll see, I custom-make lots of my props and equipment. I've already set up our first subject, but it's looking a bit wilted now," sighed Andy, →

TECHNIQUE ASSESSMENT

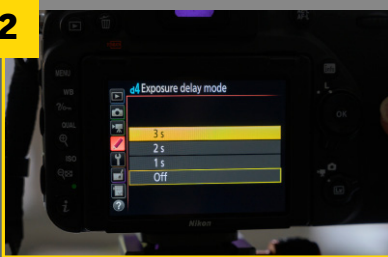
1



TRIPOD SETTINGS

Andy says... When using a tripod, switch off Vibration Reduction to prevent the system compensating for movement that isn't actually there. Once autofocus is achieved, switch this off to lock it in. Macro lenses can be slow to focus, so use the focus limiter switch to prevent excessive hunting.

2



EXPOSURE DELAY MODE

Andy says... When shooting up close, even the teeniest amount of movement will be amplified, so I suggested John set a three-second exposure delay. After pressing the shutter the camera raises the mirror and then waits to allow vibration from this movement to subside before taking the exposure.

3



APERTURE PRIORITY

Andy says... When shooting close-ups, depth of field is everything, so I suggested shooting in Aperture Priority mode; shutter speed becomes irrelevant when using a tripod, particularly when shooting indoors with no breeze to contend with. I often set a little negative exposure compensation to ensure that no highlights are blown.



PRO KIT PAINTED GLASS

Andy says... I've created my own coloured backgrounds by hand-painting sheets of glass; this enables the background light to shine through for a bright background. By hand-painting them there's an uneven spread of paint, which results in a more interesting texture. I can create a huge variety of tones by stacking the different-coloured sheets together.

pointing out the bright yellow California poppy set in a miniature port bottle. "I've been shooting it this morning, but I'll just pop and get another one," he added as he headed into the garden, secateurs in hand.

"My wife's the real gardener, I just photograph them!" he confessed on returning with a fresh specimen. "And we'll find all our subjects for today's shoot growing here. I do shoot outside with the flowers in their environment, but we've got showers forecast today, and shooting inside there's no wind to contend with."

Andy placed some sheets of painted glass into the slots at the back of his tabletop studio, and what looked like a picture frame's mount board surround towards the front. He then instructed John to set up his camera on a tripod, poking his lens through the hole.

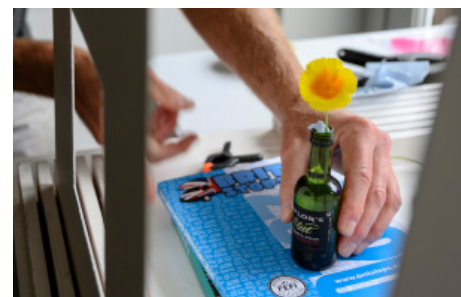
"What's with the picture frame?" queried John, "We're not ready to mount it on the wall quite yet!"

"It's what I use as a reflector," revealed Andy. "The plant is backlit by the indirect light streaming through the windows and hitting the coloured glass, which creates a really vibrant backdrop. The white frame is made from a spare piece of mount board, and bounces light back onto the plant, filling in shadows. With flower photography it's generally best to shoot against diffused sunlight, such as a north-facing window. And if you have no choice but to shoot

against full sunlight, then you can always stick some baking paper, or similar, onto the window to diffuse it."

A QUESTION OF COMPOSITION

Andy then asked John to frame up his shot and checked over his composition. The flower was in the centre of the frame with space all around it, in all taking up about 10 per cent of the image area. "You need to get closer – much closer!" advised Andy.



"And while you could crop in to get the composition you want, you lose pixels that way – and the size you could potentially print it at. Plus the brush strokes of the painted glass are clearly visible, due to the increased depth of field, and distract from the flower itself. Also, you don't want the flower to be in the middle of the image – try placing the stem according to the rule of thirds, so that there's more 'breathing space' facing the flower than behind it."

A CLOSE CALL

Taking Andy's advice on board, John moved his tripod much closer, so that the flower was now taking up a good half of the image frame, but was struggling to get the flower centred vertically. He started to adjust his tripod legs to get the right height, but Andy stopped him: "There's an easier way! Now that you've got the subject at the size you want, move it into the correct

SUPER SHOT #1

Camera:	Nikon D750
Lens:	105mm f/2.8
Exposure:	1/80 sec, f/4, ISO100

EXPERT INSIGHT DEPTH OF FIELD

Andy says... Shooting extreme macro close-ups severely restricts depth of field, so shooting wide open might only give you less than a millimetre of sharpness. Closing down the aperture extends depth of field dramatically, but even so you'll probably not get the full flower, from closest to furthest petal, in focus. I don't worry too much about diffraction when shooting macro, where the entire image becomes softer at very narrow apertures, as my style of shooting is soft and dreamy. At the end of the day, there's no 'right' aperture – it's purely down to the look that you're after.



**SUPER
SHOT #2**

Camera:	Nikon D750
Lens:	105mm f/2.8
Exposure:	1/250 sec, f/4, ISO100

**PRO KIT
BLACK BOX**

Andy says... To create a black background I've glued a sheet of black velvet to the back of a cardboard box and painted the sides with black acrylic paint. The velvet is completely nonreflective, absorbing all light, while the sides of the box further prevent any light bouncing around. I place the box behind the flower I'm photographing and the result is a pure black background – which makes the flower completely stand out. The camera's exposure meter will attempt to brighten the entire image to provide a wider range of tones, so it's important to also dial in some negative exposure compensation.



Andy makes many of his props for shooting flowers, including this painted black box.

position, rather than adjusting the entire tripod setup." He popped a couple of books underneath the bottle holding the flower to raise it to a better height and then carefully moved it within the frame to be in a pleasing position, using a dab of Blu-Tack to secure the stem in place for good measure.

Happy with the composition, Andy instructed John to ensure that he focused on the stamens – "think of them as the 'eye' of the flower!" He then fired off a sequence of shots through the aperture range. They'd also started with a contrasting blue background, but then switched to yellow, and the Super Shot #1, was in the bag.

PAINT IT BLACK

Next up was the astrantia. This plant had a far more complex shape, with several flower heads. "You can't possibly get

everything in focus here," said Andy, "so you'll have to pick your point carefully."

John turned the stem of the flower so that three of the flower heads were roughly on the same plane of focus, with another one behind and another in front, thereby giving out-of-focus areas both in front of and behind the main area of interest.

"Now for the background," mused Andy. With our first subject we went for a really colourful background, but now let's try a complete absence of colour. A pure black background will really contrast against the white of the astrantia."

He proceeded to get a cardboard box, its insides painted black. "Ah, so we're putting the flower inside this?" questioned John.

"No, we still want the flower to be backlit, with the reflector throwing light back into the front of it," came the reply. "We'll position the box a foot or so behind our subject, that way you'll see absolutely nothing at all behind the flower while the sunlight lights up the flower itself. You'll also have to use some negative exposure compensation, as the camera will attempt to even out the exposure to a wishy-washy grey – but we want our background to be completely pitch black."

John duly dialled in varying amounts of exposure compensation, and on examining the image on the back of the camera, the pair agreed that -2 stops did the trick.

"Finally, a square format can work really well with flower photography, so we'll shoot with cropping in mind," suggested Andy.

Pleased with Super Shot #2, it was time to try something a little more advanced.

A THORNY SUBJECT

After rustling around in the garden, Andy reappeared with the head of an



The white mount board frame acts as a reflector to shine light back into the plant

echinops – otherwise known as a globe thistle. Not in flower, it's spiny head had an amazing spiky texture that would prove to give the pair countless shooting options. "We can have some fun with this and really start to get creative with your Nikon's Multiple Exposure feature," he said. "There are plenty of techniques we can explore, with the use of multiple exposures. While you could do this in Photoshop, I prefer capturing these in camera, rather than merging images later on in post."

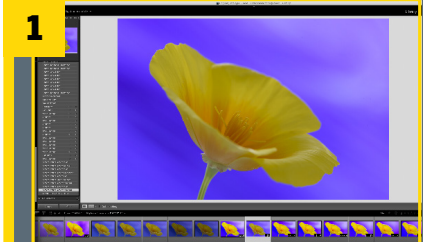
He showed John how to select the Multiple Exposure function from his D750's Photo Shooting Menu and explained the available options: "If you select 'Single' the function will turn off after you have taken one set of images, so as we're going to try a few different compositions, select 'Series' instead, which will keep the function turned on until you physically switch it off again. The number of exposures you'll be able to combine depends on the camera model; my D800E can manage up to 10, while your D750 can combine up to three exposures, but that's plenty! Finally, the Auto Gain option automatically calculates the correct exposure for the finished shot." →

**EXPERT INSIGHT
COMPLEMENTARY OR
SIMILAR COLOURS?**

Andy says... When deciding on the background colour for your shot, it's usually best to go for a 'complementary colour' that sits opposite your subject on a colour wheel, pairing a warm and cool colour together. Typically, blue and orange go together as do purple and yellow, and while red and green are also complementary colours, this last combination is reminiscent of Christmas, so I tend to use with caution! However, very similar hues can also work really well together, for a more subtle image. It all depends on the feeling you want to convey.

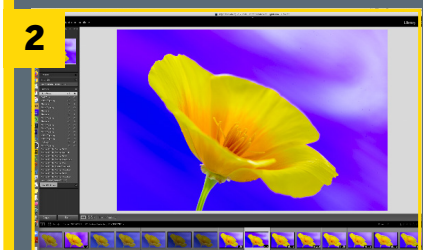


**HOW TO:
PROCESS FLOWER SHOTS**



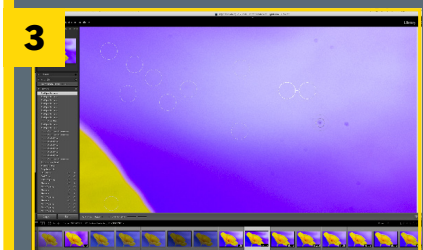
THE RIGHT PROFILE

Andy says... The Profiles that appear in Lightroom's Camera Calibration panel vary depending on the camera. I check what effect the Profiles have on an image – they can have a big effect on colours, especially. In this instance I chose the Camera Standard profile as it emphasized the purple in the top right and looks brighter overall.



MAX OUT THE HISTOGRAM

Andy says... The shot needed more contrast, so I moved the Blacks slider to the left to deepen darker tones, and Whites to the right to increase lighter tones. I try to 'stretch' the histogram as much as I can, using the whole dynamic range. I add further contrast by adjusting the Darks and Lights in the Tone Curve.



CROP, CLEAN & SHARPEN

Andy says... I felt the crop needed to be tightened a little; I also noticed a lot of dust spots on John's sensor, so these needed to be removed. Finally, it needed a little sharpening, but as there wasn't a lot of detail in this image and I didn't want to oversharpen the subtle areas, I just sharpened the area around the stamens with the Radial tool.



John and Andy experimented with a variety of double-exposure effects, backgrounds and off-centre crops, illustrating the endless variety of possible images that you can get from a single subject.

Andy then encouraged John to take shots of the plant in trios, moving it slightly between each individual shot, then refocusing before taking the next shot. As they shot each sequence, the multi-exposed results magically appeared on the rear LCD – though the image remains a Raw file if you are shooting in Raw. Areas of the flower that overlapped became more pronounced, while those that didn't took on a more ghostly appearance; moving the flower away from the camera by a few centimetres produced a halo effect, for example. They tried shooting with the black box as the background, but also without anything behind the flower, so the hues of the garden merged into a greenish blur.

"There are endless ways to photograph the same flower," advised Andy. "With a circular subject, such as this echinops, a square format very often works best for the final composition. The centre of the flower doesn't have to be in the centre of the frame though, and there is something to be said for a tight crop where the image becomes more abstract and challenging, thus creating a certain mystery, which I like!"

Once again, they were spoilt for choice for Super Shot #3 – they could have presented three together as a triptych, but in the end plumped for a super-close shot with a shallow depth of field to give interest and intrigue to the shot.



PRO KIT FLOWER SUBJECTS

Andy says... There is an astonishing variety of flowers of all imaginable colours, shapes and sizes, and I'm lucky enough to have a selection of subjects in my garden; for our shoot we used a California poppy, echinops, cornflower and astrantia. I fill small bottles with a little water to keep them fresh, and use a blob of Blu-Tack to keep them in place while I move the bottles for the best composition.

DIFFERENT STROKES

The final subject was a beautiful blue cornflower, and Andy's plan was to take the multiple exposure technique a step further: "I was an artist long before I became a →



**SUPER
SHOT #3**

Camera:	Nikon D750
Lens:	105mm f/2.8
Exposure:	1/4 sec, f/5.6, ISO100

SUPER SHOT #4

Camera:	Nikon D750
Lens:	105mm f/2.8
Exposure:	1/20 sec, f/5.6, ISO100

PRO TIP TILT YOUR CAMERA

Andy says... In many genres of photography, getting your frame dead level is paramount, but the opposite is true with flowers. I'll often shoot off-kilter for the most pleasing composition and to create leading lines, with the stem of the plant coming from near a corner. It's far easier to tilt the camera than the flower itself.



photographer, and so if we get this right we'll be able to pull off an abstract, almost watercolour effect."

Once again, he encouraged John to take trios of shots of the flower, moving it ever so subtly between shots, twisting the stem so that the petals lay in slightly different positions each time, or tilting the flower by a couple of degrees between shots. As the image would be darker where the exposures overlay, he suggested that John keep the flower bulb in the same place in the frame as much as possible, but focus on different parts of the flower each time, such as the bulb, closest petals, then furthest petals.

When the subtle watercolour rendition appeared on the back of the camera's LCD, they knew that they had bagged their final Super Shot of the day.

JOHN'S COMMENT



I was amazed at Andy's home-made studio setup – it shows you don't have to spend a fortune. I can't wait to try out what I've learnt to shoot some of my pot plants at home that have just come into bloom, to enter into the next Welwyn Garden City Photographic Club contest!



ANDY'S VERDICT

John certainly knew his stuff technically, but just needed to work on his composition. With flower photography, it's all

about getting in close and eliminating distractions to make the plant the star of the show. Above all, keep trying different ideas. Your winning shot might just be something you just haven't tried yet! 📸

Image: © David Warren

FLOWER PHOTOGRAPHY



PRO PORTFOLIO ANDY SMALL



For the multiple exposure of the cornflower, the plant was moved very slightly between shots.



POPPIES

This image was taken early evening. As with most of my shots, I like them to have a painterly quality to them, but I do like to have a focal point in focus. This effect was created by taking two multiple exposures that were combined in camera.



ALLIUM

Here, there are two exposures combined in camera, one focused on the main flower and one focused on the leaves. In both this and the Poppies images, the widest available aperture f/4.2 was used – otherwise there'd be too much in focus.

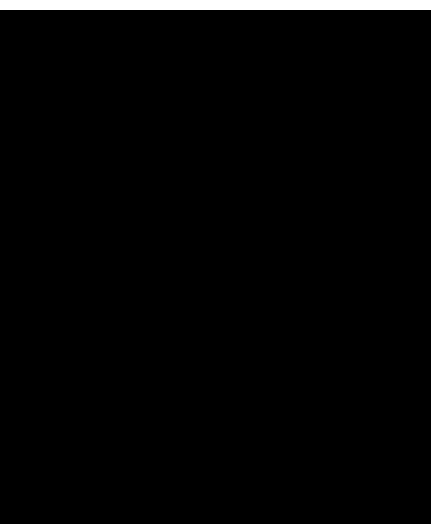


HOGWEED

I wasn't able to look through the viewfinder while taking the three shots for this, so I moved the camera up and down and left and right for each shot. I took enough photos to have lots to work from in post.

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Next issue our Apprentice heads to Woburn woods for a masterclass in mountain bike photography