

PLANT PORTRAITS  
Photographic Workshop – Wild Ones – Sugar Grove Nature Center

The purpose of a plant portrait is to take an image of a whole plant, or large parts of it, and can also include a bit of the surroundings to indicate the habitat in which the plant grows. The emphasis is just one plant or a cluster of plants, which should be in sharp focus, with the background either somewhat out of focus or darker than the subject. Plants generally look best when photographed in their natural surroundings, since this contributes much to the character and ambience of the photograph.

Before taking photos, move around the subject to determine good viewpoint to place the camera. Some possibilities include: eye-level in front of the subject, off to one side or the other, lower to the ground, or elevated.

As in taking portraits of people, a moderate telephone setting or lens is often the best choice, as it helps isolate the subject and the shallower depth of field helps separate the plant from the background. There are instances with a wide-angle setting or lens can be dramatic — moving the camera close to the subject to emphasize it can reduce the importance of the background, even though the background is in sharp focus.

Be sure to look in the background behind the subject. Is it cluttered, or does it have disturbing reflections, crisscrossing lines, or visual elements that distract from or confuse the subject? In some cases, you can position the camera so a deep shadow falls behind the subject.

The selection of lighting can also help isolate the plant; for example having the plant in bright light while a shadow falls on the background. Consider the lighting possibilities that might be suitable for a particular situation: frontal, upper left, side, back, flash, or fill flash.

EXERCISES:

Select a plant specimen that you find particularly attractive and take photos a number of different ways. Here are some variables you can try. Take advantage of your digital camera, which allows you to immediately see the results and does not cost more to take many images!

1. Take both vertical and horizontal images.
2. Move laterally around the plant and take photos.
3. Move the camera low to the ground.
4. Move closer or farther away from the subject.
5. Take photos using wide-angle, normal, and telephoto settings.
6. Take photos stand up normally, kneeling or lying on the ground.
7. Experiment with different types of lighting – full sun, partial overcast, shade, sunrise, sunset; front, 30° over the shoulder, side, back, flash, fill-flash, bounce-flash.
8. With “point & shoot” cameras, try different program or scene modes, such as Portrait, Sport or Action, Close-up.
9. With SLRs and advanced compact cameras, experiment with changing the depth of field in Aperture Priority.

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