

Close-up
Photographic Workshop – Wild Ones – Sugar Grove Nature Center

In the days of film cameras, it took special lenses and/or equipment of take close-up photographs. Today, most digital cameras, even inexpensive point-and-shoot ones, are capable of taking amazingly good close-up photos. With digital single-lens reflex cameras, most standard zoom lenses permit close-ups, and all the major camera manufactures offer special macro lenses. Always expensive, these devoted macro lenses offer superb image quality.

However, the ability of the camera to focus only a few inches from a subject does not guarantee good close-up photos! For more consistent results, pay attention to the following details.

- Focus carefully. Many autofocus cameras allow one to “lock” the focus on a subject and then move the camera for best composition.
- Position the camera carefully. Some subjects, like leaves, look best when the camera is parallel to them while others, such as flowers, are most attractive when the camera is somewhat a bit above and off to the side.
- Watch the background for distracting elements. Try to position the camera so that darker area falls behind the subject.
- The closer the camera focuses, the shallower the depth of field. On cameras with aperture priority, the f-stop can be adjusted to ensure that the feature of interest is in sharp focus while the background is not.
- With automatic cameras, try different program modes, such as “Close-up/Macro.”
- Use a tripod if possible to minimize camera movement.
- Do NOT always set the zoom lens to wide-angle! Try moving away from the subject and zooming in to moderate telephoto settings, at least as close as the lens will focus.
- Try to avoid taking close-ups on windy days or use a shield to block the wind.
- If wind cannot be avoided, try using a flash to stop movement and take a series of photos in the hope that one will be in focus.

- Soft light is best for close-ups, such as on cloudy days or when the sun is partially obscured by high clouds.
- To soften the harsh shadows of bright sunshine, use a diffuser such as a piece of thin opaque plastic or thin white fabric.

How close is close? Even though digital cameras focus to an inch or so away from a subject, usually you do NOT want to actually focus that closely. There are several reasons for this. First, the camera is usually at the widest-angle setting, which results in the “Jimmy Durante” distortion effect. Second, objects are not recognizable at extremely close distances; unless you deliberately want to show tiny details, avoid such photos. As with plant portraits, a moderate telephoto zoom setting usually gives the best results.

Exercises.

1. Use the guidelines and variables above to take a series of close-up photos.
2. There are a number of places to take close-up photos of flowers at Sugar Grove – the flower beds in front of the Nature Center, the Monarch garden, the area around the bird feeders, the herb garden on the south side of the corn crib, and the prairie.
3. Take close-up photos of other plant features, such as leaves, fruits, bark, and twigs.
4. To avoid “auto-focus frustration syndrome,” try different auto-focus settings to lock the focus before final composition of the image.
5. Experiment with using various telephoto settings. While the camera may be farther away from the subject, the resulting images may be more pleasing close-ups.
6. Use “aperture priority” and take a series of images varying the f-stop for each image.

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