Wildflower Photography

by Tom Potter

Late summer and fall pose special challenges to wildflower photography. A cluttered image is the most common problem at this time of year. The fundamental rule of good wildflower photography is *keep it simple!*

As we all know, the flowers of late summer and fall are, for the most part, composites. These plants tend to have numerous flowering stalks and heads, making it difficult to capture the essence of the structure and the beauty of the flower in an uncluttered image. You will need to seek out plants in a somewhat isolated setting. This is not easy, but they are out there, and the effort will pay off.

When you look through the viewfinder, be sure to look edge to edge and see the entire image area, not just that to which your eye and brain are psychologically tuned at the moment. Your eye can easily isolate what you like, but the film records all detail in a scene. That is why so many anticipated images come back from the processor as disappointments. It takes only a second to click the shutter — but more time to achieve the composition that will provide a lasting, high quality image.

Photograph your subjects early or late in the day. The light is warmer then, adding to the richness of color saturation. The breeze is generally lighter, causing less swaying of the flowers. (Movement precludes the use of slower shutter speeds, which help define the depth of focus.) When you isolate a sunlit subject from a shaded background, the situation is ideal. That can happen when the sun is at a low angle, in early morning or in late afternoon. Often in the fall, a morning dew will enhance the subject, adding a special

*Deer tongue (Carphophorus paniculatus) at Kissimmee Prairie Sanctuary.*
dimension to the image, such as a jewelled spider web or insect.

For the detail and snap that you want in the photos of these complex flowers, use a slow-speed film that provides both high resolution and fine grain. The slower films also produce the best color saturation. Choices include Kodachrome 25 and 64, Kodak Ektachrome 100, Fujichrome Velvia, and Fujichrome Provia 100.

For a more ethereal look, consider a high-speed film providing more grain to the image. The same result can be obtained by using a finely meshed screen material or special filter over the front of the lens. The viewfinder should allow you to see the results before shooting.

To photograph an entire field of ironweed or daisies, the control of field depth is important, so use as low an f-stop as possible, say f11-f22, depending on your lens of choice. Wide-angle lenses provide the best depth and allow you to place the near objects very close to the front of the camera. This will provide a seemingly vast sweep of flowers, often exaggerating the scene—a great technique. If you tilt your camera to show just a little sky, the flowers will seem to sweep to the horizon! It is best to use a tripod at all times, especially when you are using slow shutter speeds with low f-stops.

A telephoto lens can provide a tighter image for a field of composites. This type of lens compresses images, creating a sense of compactness. Try putting this lens on and observing the image it creates in the viewfinder. A good technique is to alternate the telephoto and wide-angle lenses when working in a field of flowers.

Since many fall flowers are tall, consider a vertical format. Try setting up your equipment at a low level to give an even setting for the tall plant, placing the flower head toward the top of the scene.

In conclusion, to create the desired images for this season, remember to:

- Work early or late.
- Select uncluttered scenes.
- Watch for, and use, dark backgrounds.
- Select a high-quality, low-speed film.
- Use a tripod.
- Try a wide-angle lens for sweeping fields of flowers.
- Use a telephoto lens for compressing a scene.
- Use a vertical format for tall plants.

Above all, be patient!

Tom Potter is a professional photographer and charter member of the Indiana Native Plant and Wildflower Society. Article reprinted, with permission, from the Autumn 1995 issue of Indiana Native Plant and Wildflower Society News.

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Watch What You’re Doing!

As concerned environmentalists, we’re upset when we read or hear of stealing or destruction of endangered plants or rare habitats. But sometimes we fail to pay attention to what damage our activities may cause in protected areas.

Even just taking pictures.

We get excited about the opportunity to take a photograph of a special blossom or maybe of a common flower in an uncommon light. We become oblivious to the surrounding herbs and shrubs and trample them thoughtlessly, tearing the grasses as we dig in our toes to kneel, or mashing mosses and lichens as we circle for the best angle.

Bird photographers, too, in their obsession to take photos of nestlings, sometimes forget that the nestlings need protection and care. If the parents are kept away for too long a time, baby birds may suffer from dehydration, heat, or predation. Even those who are only birdwatching can cause environmental damage if they barge through bushes, down stream banks, and through fragile habitats, following the elusive addition to the life list.

Be aware of even your seemingly harmless actions. All our good intentions can be undone if we fail to “see” what we are doing.