

How to Take Really Great Photos of Floral Designs

A step-by-step guide.

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Today more than ever, good photographs can be a crucial factor in your marketing success. Sure, your eFlorist website (or other turnkey website) comes with an ample supply of gorgeous, professionally shot, ever-changing photos. But if your website also features photos that are your own original designs, different from what consumers can find on other sites, that's going to set you way in front of the pack.

Your original photos don't have to be the same quality as those supplied by Teleflora—but they do need to meet a certain minimum standard.

Once you're set up to take photos and confident with your ability to do so, you'll

find photography a useful tool in many ways. You can e-mail a photo of a gift arrangement to the person who ordered it. You can keep a visual record of your shop's work for your own future reference. On your website, not just the photos themselves but the titles and descriptions can help drive traffic to the site if you write them with "key words" in mind—the words that someone using a search engine might use, like "orchid wedding bouquet."

Photography can also be a tool for checking and enhancing your design skills. "The camera provides great feedback," says Cathy Hillen-Rulloda AIFD, PFCI, of Avante Gardens-Florals Unique in Anaheim,

California. "It catches things you might miss with the naked eye, like too many foliages, overstuffing, exposed floral tape or foam, or dirty water in the vase. It helps you see if the rhythm in an arrangement is off." Sometimes you'll need to adjust designs specifically to compensate for the camera's limitations (more on that in a minute). But generally, those adjustments will also improve the design to the naked eye.

"I don't have the time," we hear you saying. It does take time to set up a space in your shop where photography can take place—and for many shops, space is also a challenge. But after the initial setup, taking a photo can be as quick as pressing a button. "Almost everything on our website is something we shot when it was headed out the door," says Cathy.

The other excuse florists commonly give is, "I don't know how." Well, here you go! Our step-by-step follows. Bear in mind, your first photos may not turn out anything like those you see on these pages. Keep at it. Experiment. The great thing about digital photography is that it costs nothing to take another photo—and another, and another.

Step 1. Buy a camera—and a tripod.

You don't actually need a fancy camera to take photos that will look good on the web. (Professional print photography is something else again.) A good-quality "point and shoot" will suffice. You may, however, prefer a camera that allows you

some options for overriding automatic controls. For example, you might like the ability to focus manually, or to switch your camera's automatic focus to a more precise "spot focus" mode. You might also appreciate the ability to adjust your camera's exposure and white balance (more on what this means later). These controls are standard features on many inexpensive cameras.

Nearly as indispensable as a camera is a tripod, to hold your camera steady and make sure you get a good focus. Get a tripod with an easy camera release, so you can remove the camera easily to look at the pictures you've taken and re-take them if necessary. Ultimately, you may want a camera with a wireless connection to a computer monitor, so you can check out the photos instantly on a larger screen. But let's keep moving one step at a time.

Step 2. Create a set.

Two things essential to good floral photography are: a clean, neutral background and abundant, yet diffuse lighting. First, let's talk about the background. The approach many florists take is to place a design in front of draped fabric. That works better than just leaving it on a cluttered work table—but it's still problematic.

In **photo A**, an arrangement of lavender sweetpeas is seen against a patterned fabric, which provides a sense of environment, but is ultimately busy and distracting. We see the fabric, not the flowers.

In **photo B**, the patterned fabric is replaced with plain yellow fabric—better, and this setup looks fine to the naked eye, but unless you have the skill to blur out the background and keep the arrangement in sharp focus, the camera makes the wrinkles in the fabric jump forward and compete with the design.

The ideal is a background surface that's completely smooth, in white or a neutral color like medium gray. **Photo C** shows the same design against photographer's seamless paper. Better yet is to create a backdrop using a flexible, water-resistant material like plexiglass or formica. These materials can be sprayed with glass cleaner and wiped down if they get wet, which is likely to happen with floral designs. Unlike paper, they also won't darken if they get wet. Cathy Hillen-Rulloda uses a four-by-eight-foot sheet of matt-finish formica, bent into a curving right angle so there is no edge or horizon line in the background.

The easy way to achieve the ideal is to buy a premade light tent like the Cubelite, shown on the opposite page. The Cubelite comes with a sheet of white Mylar that fits inside the cube. It's easy to care for and eliminates problems with wrinkles, seams or stains. Another premade light tent, the EZcube, likewise comes with a seamless white fabric backdrop, called a "sweep." Replacement sweeps are available in different colors and mottled textures.

But the real point of a light tent, like the Cubelite or the EZcube, is the foolproof lighting system (more on lighting in the next section).

The Cubelite is available in different sizes. "I've found you really need the four-foot Cubelite for taller arrangements," says H. Clay Atchison III of McAdams Floral in Victoria, Texas. "Even a five-foot would be good if you have the space." Shown here is the four-foot. It comes with a removable front (not shown in our photo) as well as a professional photographer's light and reflector. The EZcube also comes in a variety of sizes and with accessories. More information on both systems can be found at www.cubelite.com and www.ezcube.com.



PHOTO A



PHOTO B



PHOTO C

Lighting is the key to good photography. It's made easy with a premade light tent like the one that comes as part of the Cubelite system, seen on the opposite page (camera and tripod not included). More information can be found in the body of this article and at www.cubelite.com.



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Step 3. Light your arrangement.

"Lighting is key," says Cathy. "Too much and the whites look blown out, too little and the deep colors fade into black voids." The direction of the lights and their color temperature are also important.

Photo D shows the problem with just using the flash on your camera. The flash produces a bright light that hits the design from the front. Therefore, it produces unwelcome shadows projected distractingly onto the background, rather than below the design. It tends to flatten the image rather than creating the illusion of depth in the photo. Meanwhile, dark areas of the design

often remain dark, while bright areas jump out, brightly reflected.

Clamp lights, available at home improvement stores, allow you to position a bright light wherever you want it. They should be filled with rather bright bulbs, like 100 watts, and these bulbs should ideally be tungsten or daylight-balanced compact fluorescent bulbs. A standard light bulb produces light with a yellowish cast, as shown in **photo E**. You may be able to correct this problem without changing the lights if your camera has a setting that allows you to adjust the white balance.

Professional photographers generally place lights to the side of the subject, and possibly above it as well. They may place

lights on both sides. A more common strategy is to place a light on one side, producing soft shadows that lend a sense of depth to the subject. To make sure the unlit side isn't too dark, they'll place a reflector on that side that bounces some of the light back onto the subject (as seen in the photo on page 48).

Again, all of this is easily duplicated with the professional lighting system that comes with the Cubelite or EZcube system. The bright, color-balanced light is diffused through the tent, dispersing both light and shadow so that every flower can be seen in crisp detail. The tent also protects the flowers from getting too hot, which can be a danger with direct lighting.



PHOTO D



PHOTO E



PHOTO F



PHOTO G



PHOTO H

Step 4: Find the right angle.

Your tripod will allow you to raise and lower the camera and adjust the angle on your design. The correct angle depends on the design itself. Have you created surface texture that requires a higher camera angle? Or is the design fashioned in a premium container that warrants a lower angle, the better to display it?

In our example, lavender sweetpeas are arranged in a bed of blue hydrangea, which also serves as a design grid. The top of the container is adorned with a combination of Oasis aluminum wire and beaded wire, both in the new Ice Blue color. We want to see some of this container treatment; at the same time, we want the focus to be on the flowers.

Photo F is pretty much straight on. We see the container and wire and beads clearly, but the flowers appear less abundant and frothy than they really are. In **photo G**, the wire and beads can't really be appreciated. The best choice in this case is **photo H**, in between.

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Step 5: Correct any design problems.

As mentioned earlier, any number of problems that were easily missed by the naked eye may jump out at you when you look at a photograph of a design.

Beyond those problems, you may need to adapt your design for the camera's limitations. Photography flattens three dimensions into two; it compresses floral designs and makes them look busier than

in real life. Thus, once you've seen an arrangement through the camera eye (in a photograph), you'll frequently decide to edit it so it's cleaner and simpler.

In **photo J**, roses and hypericum form concentric circles, Biedermeier style, around a central burst of lisianthus. Loops of steel grass add an accent that looks fine to the naked eye—but through the camera, it's too much. **Photo K** shows the same arrangement with some of the steel grass loops removed. We can now appreciate the design's fundamental form without being

distracted by the dark grass loops. And, once they were gone, you could tell that the angle was a bit low, so the camera has been raised slightly as well.

That photographs are two-dimensional also means depth is foreshortened, and design elements that come toward you may look stunted or misshapen, like the callas and bear grass in **photo L**. One solution may be just to turn the arrangement slightly, but it may be necessary to reposition stems, as in **photo M**.



PHOTO J



PHOTO K



PHOTO L



PHOTO M



PHOTO N



PHOTO O



PHOTO P



PHOTO Q



PHOTO R

It's not uncommon for a photograph to reveal holes and dark spots in a design. Generally, these are areas that don't catch the light well, like dark rose leaves, or where recessed flowers are hidden in shadow, like the hydrangea in **photo N**. In **photo O**, the rose leaves have been trimmed and turned so that not as many are visible to the camera. A bit of hydrangea has been pulled out all the way and reinserted into the foam, but not so far, so its color and brightness show better.

Designs with white flowers on a white background offer a special challenge: the flowers and background may blend together, so that the arrangement loses its outline, as in **photo P**. The problem can be fixed in one of two ways, or a combination of both. An adjustment to the exposure, as in **photo Q**, yields more shadows and more texture in the white flowers. If the result, however, is a photo that's too dark overall, you may also choose to outline the white flowers with more foliage (here, variegated euonymus) as in **photo R**.

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Finding the correct exposure is difficult with designs that employ high contrast between light and dark. In **photo S**, the allium, equisetum, green spray mums, and Diamante pins all read fine, but the white roses look so bright they are washed out, while the dark galax leaves in the back and the dark purple statice turn to black. The first attempt to solve the problem seen in photo S is with design: the galax leaves

were removed from one side and placed on the other side (where the light is) to outline the roses; the statice was pulled out and replaced not so far back. However, these remedies didn't quite do the trick. The best solution also involves simply moving the light closer to the dark side of the design so that side receives more illumination, as in **photo T**. A similar challenge may arise with designs that combine advancing (warm)

colors like oranges and yellows with receding (cool) colors like blues and greens. The advancing colors can appear to dominate an arrangement, even if used in small amounts, while the receding colors can be harder to read without special attention to lighting.



PHOTO S



PHOTO T

Step 6: Adjust your camera settings.

Automatic settings are all very well for your vacation pictures, but when you're photographing a floral design, why not take advantage of all the options in your camera?

With most cameras, it's quite easy to change the exposure, which is the amount of light admitted into the camera. It's often even possible to program your camera for "bracketed" exposures, which simply means that, in addition to the camera's automatic exposure, you take a photo that's a little bit darker, and another photo that's a little bit

lighter. If your camera isn't programmable that way you can still adjust the exposure to a "-1" and a "+1" setting, as in **photos U, V, and W**. Often, one of these will be better than the automatic exposure. For example, with a darker (-1) exposure, you may get more detail or richer colors.



PHOTO U



PHOTO V



PHOTO W

Step 7: Focus and shoot!

While most cameras today have an automatic focus feature, again, it's worth checking the focus. You may have the option of focusing manually, if necessary. Or, your camera may offer a "spot focus" option versus the usual focus mode, in which the camera looks at a wider area and finds the best average focus.

You may also want to learn to use a simple photo editing software program like Photoshop Elements, Photoshop Express, or Picasa. These programs allow you to do more than crop or resize photos. You can whiten the background and make simple corrections to color or brightness if these seem distorted in the photo. With a little experience you can clean up blemishes that you didn't notice while taking the photo, even remove a wilted leaf or adjust the position of a rose! It takes some practice to learn these programs, but like anything else, once you know it, it will seem easy and you'll wonder how you got along without it before.

Teleflora has created an online educational program (called a webinar) for the owners of eFlorist websites with tips and techniques for using Photoshop Express. (Photoshop Express is a free program that doesn't require you to download anything to your computer.) To access the archived webinar, go to MyTeleflora.com. Log in and click on the eFlorist Service Center link from the right-hand navigation. From there, click on the eFlorist University link on the right.

You can go as far as you want with web photography, but just learning to take simple photos that will look good online is not hard and well worth your investment of time. 🌸