



Powerful close-ups

Our gardens, woodlands, fields and parks will soon be teeming with new spring life, so there's no better time to master the art of close-up photography. **Ross Hoddinott** reveals how to achieve great shots with real impact

The world looks very different in close-up. When you peer through a macro lens it changes your appreciation for what is happening right beneath your feet. Ordinary, everyday objects can be transformed. Potential subjects abound, although outdoor photographers are naturally more drawn to capturing the intricacies of flowering and non-flowering plants, insects and mini-beasts.

Close-up photography has never been more accessible. Many standard and tele-zooms boast impressively short minimum focusing distances and dedicated macro lenses have become more affordable, and for photographers on a tight budget, close-up filters are cheap.

Shooting close-up does, however, present technical challenges, but with practice these are hurdles you can soon overcome. Mastering the technique is just the beginning, though. Being able to produce technically good close-ups won't satisfy your creative side for long. The big question is; how do you transform good close-ups into powerful images with impact?



SECTION 1 Finding and studying a close-up subject

Capturing close-ups with impact begins with choice of subject. Flowers - wild or cultivated - are always popular. Non-flowering plants, including mosses, lichen and fungi are also photogenic, while the true beauty and design of insects, amphibians, reptiles and other miniature creatures are only revealed up close. By isolating key areas of detail or texture, like peeling bark, a thorn or leaf, you can make everyday subjects appear extraordinary.



Texture and even the tiniest of details can make for great close-up photographs

You need to spend time studying your subject from lots of different angles



On your doorstep...

Potential subjects are everywhere. In fact, most photographers won't need to travel further than their own back garden. Most gardens, however big or small, are home to flowers, plants and a host of mini-beasts. You can grow things

specifically to photograph, or just utilise whatever is already there. Taking pictures close to home has many advantages. You can study your subject closely and it is easier to introduce artificial backdrops or lighting. Also, you are able to seize the most

opportune moment to take pictures - when the light is at its best, for instance, or when the subject is in its prime. It is also easier to tailor photography around work and family commitments; so don't overlook what is on your doorstep.

Develop a keen eye

Regardless of the time of year, there is never a shortage of subjects to photograph, but arguably spring is the best time for close-ups. Over the coming weeks, our countryside, woodlands, gardens and parks will be brimming with fresh growth and life. Buds, uncurling leaves, colourful blossom, emerging insects and dewy cobwebs are just a handful of popular spring subjects that suit being shot in close-up. Not all subjects are quite so obvious, though. Practically anything can look striking in close-up; the skill is identifying it. You need to train your eye to look at your environment differently and in detail. Look down beneath your feet, instead of straight ahead;

and get low - on your hands and knees if you have to - to get nearer to nature and to alter perspective. If your subject is static, take time to look at it from different angles, and study how it is affected by light. Also, examine it closely. Shooting at magnification will highlight any imperfections or damage to the subject. Normally you will only want to photograph subjects which are pristine and in prime condition. For example, insects are best photographed within a day or two after they first emerge, and flowers soon after they bloom. A dragonfly with slightly tatty wings, or flower faded by the sun, will have far less impact in a picture. Remember; be selective and don't compromise.

PRO TIP - Some insects, particularly dragonflies, are highly territorial. Take time to observe their movements. Having established where they regularly land to rest, position yourself nearby. Then, when the insect next lands, you will be ready to slowly move into a picture taking position, avoiding any unnecessary sudden movements.



SECTION 2 Lighting

Choice of subject is important, but often it is not the subject itself that makes the image, but the way in which it is photographed. It might be a cliché, but it is better to shoot an ordinary subject in an extraordinary way than the other way round. To create powerful close-ups, composition and viewpoint are key ingredients. However, the quality of light and its direction are more important still.

Seeing the light

By working at such close range, macro photographers possess a great deal of control over the way their subject is lit. It is possible to manipulate light through the use of shade, shooting position, or by using flash or reflectors. At first, you might think that the finer subtleties of light would be lost in a close-up image, but its warmth and quality are just as important. Lighting from overhead can create very bland, shadow-free results; fine for record shots, but

rarely inspiring. Therefore, midday light is generally best avoided. Morning and evening light - when the sun's position in lower in the sky - is best for outdoor photography. Side lighting will enhance texture and form and generate a greater feeling of depth in your close-ups, but for more dramatic results, opt for backlighting. Backlighting will highlight fine detail - like the tiny hairs covering an insect's body; the intricate veins of a leaf; or the



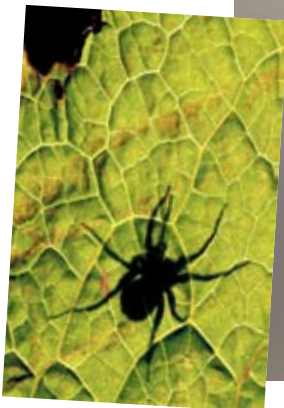
Backlight on a subject adds an attractive halo to the outer edge of it

translucent quality of to be found in a butterfly's wings. By shooting in the light's general direction, an attractive halo will form around your subject. Be aware, though, that backlighting can easily fool a camera's TTL metering system - typically into underexposing results. Therefore, regularly

study the histograms of backlit images and apply positive (+) compensation, if required, to bring out shadow and midtone detail. Also be careful of flare - when shooting towards the light - attach a lens hood, or shield the lens with your hand, in order to avoid a reduction in contrast.

Create silhouettes

Why not take the idea of backlighting one step further, by shooting close-up subjects silhouetted. Silhouettes are devoid of detail or colour, but create bold, eye-catching results. Again, subject choice is important. Opt for instantly recognisable subjects - with a strong shape or interesting outline. Contrast your subject against a lighter background so that it stands out clearly - for example, the outline of an insect resting on a backlit leaf. To create an inky silhouette, correctly meter for the brightest area of the frame. The easiest way to do this is by using your camera's spot metering mode. Shooting silhouettes is a great way to make your images stand out easily from the crowd, because they are so graphic.



Shooting silhouettes removes detail but can add real drama to a close-up photograph

Overcast light

When striving to capture powerful close-ups, it is easy to assume that lighting must always be dramatic. However, combined with right subject matter, bright, overcast light is just as capable of producing eye-catching results. By reducing the glare radiating from foliage in bright conditions, overcast light can help restore natural colour saturation. It also lowers the level of contrast, allowing close-up photographers to capture fine, miniature detail that might otherwise have been washed-out and lost in more direct light.



PRO TIP - If the sunlight is harsh when shooting plants or flowers, casting your subject into shade - using your shadow or an umbrella - is a useful trick for reducing contrast. Doing so will give the colours in your shot added vibrancy and punch.

SECTION 3 Close-up composition

If you want your close-up images to stand out, you need to combine good use of light with strong, clean and imaginative compositions.

Rule of thirds

The rules of composition are just as relevant to macro, as they are to other forms of photography. The 'rule of thirds' - where you imagine the image-space divided into nine equal parts by two horizontal and two vertical lines - is particularly helpful. By placing your subject - or a key point of interest - at, or near, a point where the lines intersect, the image is immediately strengthened. Positioning the subject off-centre will achieve a better balance and the composition will be more

stimulating - enticing the viewer's eye around the frame. You shouldn't always abide by the rules, though. Often the most striking results are created by originality. For example, one of

my most popular close-ups is of a common frog, taken near my home. Its head and eyes are peeping up from the bottom of the frame, with its body abruptly cut-off. It is



The rule of thirds applies equally to close-ups as it does to landscape photography



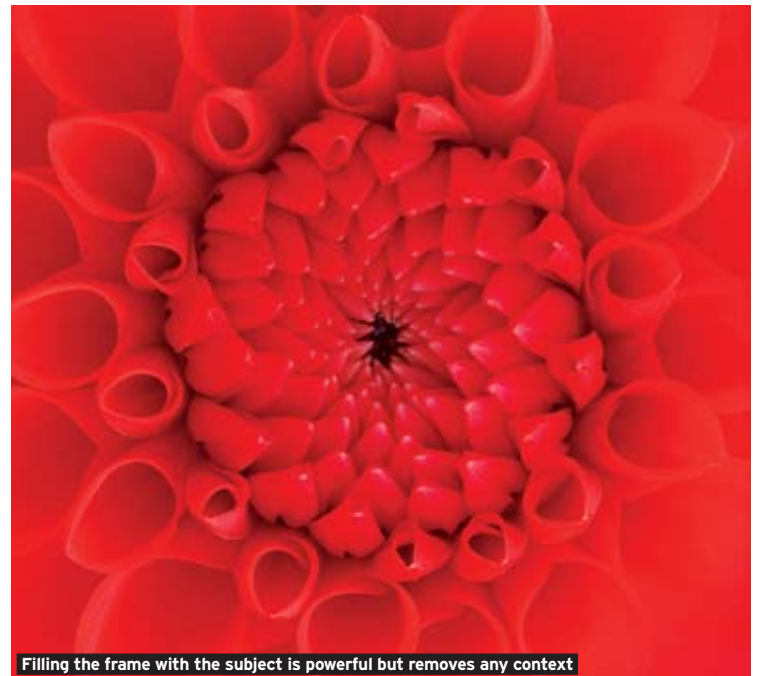
ABOVE Don't be afraid to break the rules of composition - sometimes a unique perspective can work just as well

surrounded by a large amount of empty, wasted space and the animal is central in the frame. Technically speaking, it shouldn't work - but it does. Never be afraid to experiment. While it is important to be familiar with the compositional rules; don't let them rule your composition.

To fill or not to fill the frame



Leaving space around the subject can add to the story of an image



Filling the frame with the subject is powerful but removes any context

Filling the frame with your subject can maximise impact, particularly when photographing colourful garden flowers. In this instance, placing the subject centrally can actually prove very effective, creating symmetrical, arty looking results. However, avoid filling the frame just for the sake of it - doing so can suffocate your subject. It's good not to underestimate the visual power of leaving a certain degree of

'breathing' space around your subject, or a taste of its environment. Reptiles, bugs and butterflies, in particular, benefit from the photographer leaving room in front of the subject. Doing so, can give the composition energy and interest, implying that the space is for the animal to walk, run or fly into. Empty space can also help accentuate the subject's small size and create a feeling of scale.

Less is more...

When composing close-ups, there is no set rule as to how best to arrange the shot, or what level of magnification to apply. Treat every picture-taking opportunity individually. Your approach will be greatly dictated by the subject, its size, surroundings and the result you wish to achieve. It will also depend on what you want to include and exclude from the frame. However, less is often more when shooting close-ups. If you try to cram too much detail or interest into your shots, they will grow overly, and needlessly, complex. The focal point will get confused and the image's impact will be reduced.

Exclude anything from the frame that isn't adding to the shot. A single blade of grass, out of focus flower or highlight can prove enough of a distraction that it lessens the wow factor of the main subject. Therefore, scrutinise backgrounds thoroughly. Rather than bemoan the lack of available depth-of-field when shooting at high magnifications, take advantage of it. You can render distracting

Less is often more when shooting powerful close-ups, so seek out simple compositions



background detail pleasantly out of focus by selecting the largest aperture available that will still keep your subject in acceptable focus. Depending on the subject, this can involve shooting wide open, at f/2.8 or f/4. Remember though that depth-of-field can be paper-thin as a result, so pinpoint

focusing is required. Using large apertures will help your subject stand out boldly against a background wash of colour, for instance. By altering your position or viewpoint, you can quickly and effectively alter the look, detail or colour of the backdrop for your image.

Gardening

Sometimes, in order to create a clean, clutter free background, you may have to do some 'gardening' - a technique where you carefully remove distracting elements from the subject's background. Of course, you should not damage rare plants!



Placing lines on the diagonal of the frame adds impact



Repetitive patterns always make for great photos

Shape and form

Shape and form are also good compositional aids. In close-up, photographers are able to isolate or highlight miniature detail. Look for strong, sweeping curves, lines and repetitive patterns. Lines cutting centrally through the composition, like the major vein of a leaf, look more dynamic if placed diagonally. If they are positioned vertically or horizontally, they can appear to dissect the composition in two.

Viewpoint is important too. A parallel angle will often create the most natural looking results, but to maximise impact, explore other viewpoints too. Overhead views can work well with flowers, texture and flying insects that hold their wings open while at rest. A low angle, from below the subject, can make a subject look more imposing and works

particularly well with flowers, especially if contrasted against a deep, blue, polarised sky. LiveView or a right angle-finder really come into their own when shooting at awkward angles, when it is difficult - or even impossible - to look through the viewfinder itself. It is good to avoid always taking pictures from the most obvious viewpoint. For example, rather than photograph a daisy from the normal side angle; take it from head on to highlight its disproportionately large eyes and colourful body. If you can find an unusual perspective it guarantees that your image will have impact.



PRO TIP – When shooting brightly lit or backlit subjects, I try to align myself so that deep shade forms the background. By correctly metering for the subject, the background is rendered grossly underexposed. The inky black backdrop creates a clean, simple, clutter-free background. This contrasts starkly with the subject, creating eye-catching results.

Quite simply, look for the unusual, be prepared to be unconventional and keep compositions clean and graphic. Do this, and you will soon be capturing powerful close-ups...

SECTION 4 Great gear for shooting close-ups

Tripod

This is an essential aid. They provide stability, assist focusing and allow photographers to review and fine-tune their composition. Light and depth-of-field can be in short supply when working in such close proximity to the subject, but tripods allow the use of small apertures and slower shutter speeds without the risk of camera shake. Rather than stifle creativity, they promote it.



Low angle tripods are a real bonus

Wideangle lens

The wide perspective and extensive depth-of-field created by using wideangle lenses can create striking close-ups. Combined with an extension tube (to reduce the lens' minimum focusing distance) it is possible to achieve high levels of magnification. Working distances are short, but the lens distortion can create eye-catching results.



Use a wideangle lens for a fresh look

Ringflash

Natural light will not always be sufficient. If you are photographing a moving subject, flight, or having to shoot handheld, flash may be necessary. A flash burst from a camera's built-in flash, or a flashgun, can miss - or only partly illuminate - subjects near to the camera. A dedicated ring (or a twin flash) is often a better choice. They attach to the lens via its filter thread. They have a reputation for providing very flat light.

Ring flash gives better light for macro



Remote cord

Don't undo all your hard work by capturing close-ups that are soft. Physically depressing the shutter release button can create small vibrations, which soften the resulting image. When using a tripod, employ a remote cord or device, and fire the trigger remotely. Also, employ mirror-lock. This works by locking up the reflex mirror prior to firing the shutter, thus eliminating any internal vibrations - known as 'mirror slap'.



Remote cords help to prevent blurred images

Reflector

This is a great lighting aid for macro work. Using the reflector, you can angle light onto the subject. The intensity of the light can be altered by simply moving it closer or further away. You can see the effect instantly, and they allow you to use natural light to illuminate small subjects and relieve harsh, ugly shadows. They come in different colours and reflective surfaces, too, so you can tailor the effects they generate.

Reflectors are an effective way to control light in close-up photos



Your chance to get published! Turn to page 111 to find out about this month's close-up photo competition