

Photographing magnolias

by Harold Hopkins

Your real magnolia fancier would not be long content to contemplate a plant's loveliness all to himself or herself. This showiest of Nature's flowering spectacles imperiously demands to be seen by a larger audience.

Magnolias in flower are eminently displayable, of course, but the potential viewer still has to go where the trees are. Inasmuch as nature affixes one tree to one spot, how can a magnolia's owner show off the glories of his/her tree to those who are out of strolling range?

And of those longer periods when the flowers or others of the tree's most attractive attributes have been put on hold by changes in the seasons, what is the solution here?

Photography, of course, a combination of science and toy that prolongs the season, extends a whiff of magnolia's charms to any spot on earth, and tells us not only what is, but what was—days ago or a century ago. Since photography's advent about 150 years ago its popularity and presence have increased leaps and bounds, and tempted many of us to make fools of ourselves in our scramble to get in front of the camera.

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exploitation of the camera's magic has put photography within reach of almost every family and person. Photographic and processing automation, the advent of photo color, and improvements in film quality have simply multiplied the effect. If you can point a camera and push the shutter button you're practically guaranteed a picture that's correctly exposed and in acceptable focus.

And the popularity of the so-called still camera, even in competition with movie and videotape cameras in the marketplace, shows no sign of abating. People like to hold a picture and look at it this way or that, or flop its image onto a screen and wallow in sensuous contemplation.

Well, if photography is becoming so much better day by day in every way, and if practically all of today's pictures are of acceptable quality, why this article? A fair question, and one that has essentially a single answer: to encourage you to make pictures of magnolias that are not just adequate, but superior. Superior because our subject, the magnolia, is a superior plant deserving of the best face that we can put on it.

In short, it's esthetics we're mostly thinking of when we aim a camera at a flower, a bud, a seedpod, a leaf, a branchlet, a stem or a bark pattern. There are pictures and there are pictures, and despite the debut of self-focusing, automated-exposure, electronic camera gadgetry, the person who knows what he wants to get into a picture and then acts to make it happen is going to come up with the best picture, even if he uses an Instamatic.

One of the important elements in good photography, possibly the most important, is composition, that is, making sure that all the elements within the finished square or rectangle of paper or film belong there, that they contribute to an artistic

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whole that pleases or informs or both, and that they convey the mood or feeling the photographer intended. A good photograph denotes control not only of what goes into that frame, but what's excluded from it. Photographic techniques can be learned to the point that they're automatic, but composing requires a fresh look with every shot, a consideration of all the elements in a picture and their relationships.

Probably the poorest composition results from the photographer's attempt to get everything possible into the picture. Reduction of such detail to a few significant elements can be far more pleasing and effective than depicting solid, border to border repetition, or permitting irrelevant material to clutter up and dilute the picture's message. The thinking photographer soon learns that getting in appropriate contrast of shades or tones (in black and white photography) and of complementary colors (in color photography) can help picture composition and overall visual effect.

Take a look at a number of pictures and select the ones that most impress you. Then try to determine what it is about each one that pleases, that makes the picture a success. Try to get something you think will impress viewers into your next set of pictures, using your own photography style, or lingo. Your camera can speak for you in much the same way that a painter's brush and pigments do.

This article is not intended as a treatise on photography (actually, many of our members regularly submit photographs far better than my own). But for those who want to show their magnolias at their best, there are some principles that can be applied specifically to the photographing of flowers and plants.

It's presupposed that the photographer will use a film that's sensitive enough to obtain adequate exposures in the light available, as well as a camera with a shutter fast enough to prevent blur when shooting flowers or foliage that may be stirred by winds,

or other movements, such as flying insects.

Wonderful photos can be made of almost any part of a magnolia: the whole tree, a flowering branchlet, foliage parts, stems, bark, buds, flowers, and fruit. A picture should show a plant's or a flower's character, what makes it stand out from other plants or flowers, what makes it appealing. There's seldom any real trouble here, for magnolias are almost instantly recognizable for their bold, lush effects of flower, foliage, and general appearance. Care should be taken to present the magnolia at its best. Choose a fresh flower or flowers, erect foliage, healthy buds, plump seedpods. You may need to remove faded flowers or withered leaves from the immediate shooting field defined by your camera's finder.

Decide which point or combination of points you wish to emphasize: a typical or an unusual flower, stigma or stamens or other flower parts, details of leaves or stems, shape of the tree, trunk, or the impact of its load of flowers. If you want to highlight your subject and can't find a suitable angle that provides a plain background for a flower or branchlet, try anchoring or holding a piece of cardboard or a similar flat, unwrinkled piece of material of a contrasting color behind it.

Such a board, if of a light color, also can be used to reflect light onto all or

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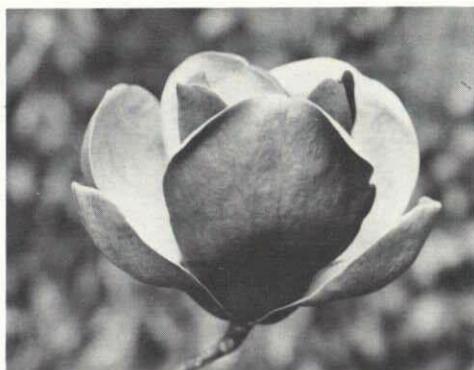
part of your subject. Lighting is important in plant photography, particularly in rendering flowers, foliage, and other parts in the truest photographic color possible.

Mid-morning and mid-afternoon are normally the best times of day to shoot flowers, though certain softer effects may be obtained in early morning, sometimes rewarding you with a photogenic covering of dew. Bright midday sunlight can be too harsh for suitable depiction of plants. Late afternoon sunlight contains too much red and pictures taken at this time are likely to have inaccurately rendered colors.

If you aren't equipped with a separate light meter or one built into your camera, check the film labeling or wrapper for information about the best camera settings for varying light conditions. With practice you can judge the intensity of light available for varying conditions of weather and in shades and shadows from trees and buildings.

Correct exposure is important in photographing flowers. If you're worried about getting the optimally right exposure, you can "bracket" by shooting one shot at what you judge—or your light meter tells you—is the correct exposure, then shoot another with the shutter opened a half-stop wider, and a third with the shutter closed down a half-stop smaller. Generally, closing down a half-stop is advisable for shooting bright or well lighted subjects, and opening up a half-stop for close-up shots or pictures of darker colored objects.

The films most of us send out for developing and printing go to mass processors who use automated machines, instead of high cost custom labor, to do the work. In the case of black and white films or color print films (such as Kodacolor), the films are first developed into negatives, then fed into an automatic printing-enlargement machine. This machine advances the negative frames one by one and prints



M. 'Redhead is a selection by Ken Durio from seedlings of M. × soulangiana 'Lennei.' Ken reports it has "redder blooms than any magnolia that we are familiar with." Like 'Lennei,' it blooms rather late. It is vigorous, compact, and multi-stemmed, and loaded with flowers each spring. Photo Ken Durio.

the images rapidly on sheets of photographic paper whose size is normally standardized at 3½ by 5 inches. The machine is self-focusing and printing exposure times are pre-set.

If your camera uses 35 mm. film, one of the most popular types today, there can sometimes be a problem because the ratio of width to length of the 35 mm. film frame does not correspond to that for the paper. Eventually there'll be print paper with measurements in the same ratio as the film, but for now the machine arbitrarily solves the problem by shading off the tops and bottoms of the image shown on the narrow ends of the negative frames and then printing what's left. You may remember backing up with your camera enough to get a tall person into a vertically framed picture, and then finding that in the actual print the subject was "scalped" or his or her feet were cut off, though not in the negative.

So if you're using a 35 mm. camera, and you plan to have prints made, be sure you compose both horizontal and vertical shots so as not to have anything that can't be sacrificed