Photography Tips for Those Involved in the Nursery Industry©

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INTRODUCTION

The need for quality photography is often overlooked by the nursery industry. Photos are sometimes the only way that growers can show products to their clients. So it's obvious that having good pictures is important. As the industry increases its focus on marketing, the need for good photography intensifies. You can't produce attractive catalogs, tags, banners, posters, etc., without good photography. By learning the basics of good photography and how to shoot good plant photos, nursery growers can, indirectly, improve sales and their bottom lines.

EQUIPMENT

Digital Versus Cameras. There have been huge improvements in digital cameras over the last few years. High-resolution digital cameras are also becoming more affordable to the average consumer. Film cameras worked well for 100 years and still do, but film is expensive to buy, develop, and scan. Also, film photos lose quality through the developing and printing process, while digital photos do not. As a result, digital photos can be higher quality. Another advantage of digital photos is that they're are ready instantly, and they can be previewed and sent to customers via e-mail immediately. However, a digital camera's big drawback is storing and retrieving all these big electronic files. Compiling an extensive digital photo archive takes a great deal of computer memory.

Point-and-Shoot Versus SLR Cameras. Point-and-shoot cameras are handy, and can sometimes result in good photos. But if you want to really improve your photography, you need to step up and get a high-resolution, single-lens-reflect (SLR) camera. Most major camera manufacturers offer models. Using SLR cameras allows you to control the exposure and aperture, which can greatly improve photos, and allows you to get shots you can't get with a point-and-shoot.

Always Use a Tripod. The slightest movement of the photographer's hand can blur a photo. Placing the camera on a tripod eliminates this problem. Tripods are most needed in low-light situations, and in instances when photographers want to take a photos with a shutter speed under 1/90th of a second.

Flashes, Reflectors, Light Meters, etc. Professional photographers put a great deal of other equipment to use. Growers should consider these. A good, detachable flash can greatly illuminate an area. The little built-in flashes don't do much good when the subject of the photo is more than just a few feet away. Reflectors are used to bounce light from a sunny area to help illuminate a shady spot, or eliminate shadows. It usually takes an assistant to help use it. Growers not wanting to purchase a photographer's reflector can also try using a large piece of white poster board. Light meters will help ensure you have the correct exposure settings on your cameras, but most cameras' built-in light meters are sufficient.

Black Cloth. Draping a black cloth behind your subject can really make it stand out. If not available, try to find a dark, uncluttered background for your subjects.

PHOTOGRAPHY BASICS

Shutter Speed and Aperture. Shutter speed is how long the sensor (or film) is exposed, while aperture controls how much light gets in. Good photographers can manipulate these variables into great shots.

Daylight. Morning or afternoon sun is always best. Mid-day sun drowns out color and casts bad shadows.

Long Exposures. Long exposures seem to bring out better colors, and are great for low-light situations. But watch out for the wind. On a windy day, it's impossible to take a long-exposure shot of a plant that won't sit still.

Depth of Field. Manipulating the aperture will allow you to change how much of the photo is in focus. Sometimes it's in the best interest of the photographer to have objects both near and far from the camera in focus. Other times objects that are not the main focus of the photo should be blurred out of focus, so they are not a distraction. Good photographers can manipulate depth of field to achieve this.

Pay Attention. Keep an eye on your plants. There is always one day out of the year that the plants look their very best. Be ready to photograph them on that day.

COMPOSITION

Determine Your Subject. Make sure you know what your subject is, and what you're trying to capture. Is it flower color? Is it the growth habit of the plant? Is it branching habit? By determining exactly what you want to show, you're better able to focus on that aspect. It's hard to capture all the positive qualities of a plant with one photo. So often several photos (sometimes taken at different times of the year) are needed to show all of a plant's assets.

Close-ups are Often Better. Don't be afraid to get close up to the subject. This will allow the camera to capture more detail. Also, by filling the camera frame with the object you want to capture, you eliminate objects in the background that could be a distraction.

Think in Threes. For whatever reason, things just look better when arranged in threes. When taking photos, look for triangular shapes, whether it be a group of flowers or a group of three plants.

Rule of Thirds. Imagine a tic-tac-toe board on your photo. Try to put the subject of your photos at one of the intersecting points. Putting the subject in the middle of the frame every time is boring.

Horizontal Versus Vertical. Amateur photographers often only shoot horizontal photos, and forget to try vertical angles. Don't be afraid to turn the camera sideways and take some vertical shots every once in a while.

Shoot from Many Different Angles. Don't just shoot one photo and move on. Experiment with many different angles and you may surprise yourself. Shoot from different sides, shoot from low angles, and don't be afraid to get a ladder, or hop in the back of a pickup truck to shoot from a high angle.

COLOR CORRECTNESS

Pinks and Yellows. Plain and simple — pinks and yellows (or shades thereof) are hard to reproduce correctly. This is true whether you're using a film or digital camera.

Experiment with different exposures for the best results.

Kodak Versus Fuji Film. For those still using film cameras, the film you choose makes a big difference. In general, Kodak is better at color correctness, while Fuji typically yields very vivid (sometimes unrealistically vivid) colors. If you want color realism, consider Kodak, but if you want really eye-popping color, consider Fuji.

Computer Software. Digital cameras vary on the color correctness they reproduce. Computer software programs available make it easy to tinker with colors until you get it right. Of course, you could also use this software to improve your plants and make them look better than they really are, but I suggest using this tool for good instead of evil.

Waste is a Terrible Thing to Mind©

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INTRODUCTION

Selection of substrates for horticultural use is often based on cost, availability, ease of handling, and consistency. Peat and pine or other types of bark are common substrate components for nursery growers in the United States. Availability and cost of peat and pinebark is greatly affected by the timber industry, transportation, and/or environmental conditions such that the supply can be inconsistent or unpredictable. Future supply of pinebark is predicted to be further constricted as papermills relocate outside of the United States or to regions of the country where freight costs will prohibit nursery use of the material. Additionally, pinebark use as a biofuel is increasing as EPA regulations requiring reduction in fossil fuels hit full stride early next year (Lu et al., 2004).

The phrase "One man's waste is another man's treasure" certainly applies to materials we find useful for various horticultural applications. Alternative products as substrate blending components for horticultural use are evermore urgent. Factors such as transportation costs, consistency of product, disease and insect infestation, and availability of alternative materials have been the primary concerns for growers. As the landscape industry continues to expand, new opportunities have developed for use of a variety of alternative materials. For example, in recent years use of bark chips or recycled rubber products as the bedding or floor of playgrounds has become commonplace.

Many substrate components such as sand, vermiculite, perlite, rockwool, styrofoam beads, and peat are intended for horticultural use with little, if any further processing needed. However, most industrial, municipal, agricultural, and manufacturing byproducts (Table 1) must be composted and/or further processed before use as a container substrate. Further processing may include hammer milling, pelleting, sizing and sorting, addition of nitrogen, or grinding.