

The poppy season is upon us once again when splashes of red wash landscapes as if from the brush strokes of Monet. Here TOM MACKIE gives you three different techniques to help capture your own masterpiece

POPPIES

PICTURE PERFECT



A tilt/shift lens is not just for correcting parallax distortion in architectural photography. The ability to use a sweet spot of focus, by adjusting the focal plane, and therefore reduce the need for such a small aperture enables the use of higher shutter speeds and less movement from flowers blowing in the slightest breeze. This image was shot on the Canon TSE 24mm; 1/30sec at f/11, ISO 100.

When I go in search of a poppy field there are key aspects that I look for in order to create a good composition. Mainly, a thick concentration of poppies with no bare patches and minimal weeds that will break up the colour. Another aspect is to have a plain background, such as a hedge or a group of trees, instead of power lines, housing estates or other distractions. If you are lucky enough to have an interesting subject in the background such as a church, lighthouse or possibly a single tree, all the better. Skies are just as important too and form a range of atmospheres. Jet contrails can be just as distracting so beautiful cumulous or cirrus clouds are preferred, otherwise use a high horizon line to crop out bad or boring skies.

WIDE-ANGLE

When working in a field of poppies, I generally use three alternative techniques to acquire three different looks. The first one is probably the most common landscape technique: using a wide-angle lens. This type of lens has great depth-of-field capabilities and gives the impression of being able to walk into the scene. In the image over the page I used ox-eye daisies to break up the red and positioned the camera at a 45 degree angle. I also came in close enough to the daisies in the foreground to give them prominence, yet high enough to look across the field to the distant tree line. When you use a wide-angle lens, the tendency is to shoot at your own standing height or the full extension of your tripod and take in as much of the scene as possible. However this can make all the features in the landscape quite small and water down the impact. By coming in close to something such as flowers gives the image more depth.

As the sun was at a 90 degree angle to the camera, I could use a polarising filter to its maximum potential to increase colour saturation and make the clouds 'pop' from the blue sky. Generally, the matrix metering mode of a DSLR is very accurate to

properly expose a scene like this, but sometimes, depending on the direction of the sun and tone of the sky, underexposure can occur. If this happens, try using a neutral density grad filter over the sky to balance or increase the exposure by using the exposure compensation feature on your camera. This image was shot at 1/2sec at f/22, ISO 100.

TILT/SHIFT LENS

There are times when flowers in your foreground are blowing in the breeze, so using a small aperture to obtain more depth-of-field and a low ISO for best quality will result in blurred flowers, because of the reduced shutter speed. A tilt/shift lens will solve this problem; by tilting the lens and changing the orientation of the plane of focus. This allows the use of a wider aperture, thus a faster shutter speed to capture the moving flowers. This image was shot at 1/30sec at f/11.

TELEPHOTOS

The second technique I apply is to isolate or compress the subject using a telephoto lens. Isolating a single poppy or two by using a telephoto lens, such as the Canon 70-200mm f/4, allows the use of a shallow depth-of-field. This selective focus technique draws attention to the subject, and I have also used selective colour by having the single red poppy amongst the yellow flowers. Compositionally, it breaks all the rules by placing the subject in the middle of the frame, but these are only guidelines, and in this case helps to accentuate the single head.

To carry out this technique, you will need to place your telephoto lens relatively close to the poppy so the background and any foreground falls out of focus. Then by using a wide aperture, say around f/4, there will be little depth-of-field and a soft, creamy background. The viewer's attention will be naturally drawn to the sharpest point in the frame.

Another use for a telephoto lens is to compress the scene. As you stand and →



ABOVE: this image was shot by placing the camera on the floor at the lens' widest angle, manually focusing and shooting 'blind'. Canon 16-35mm at 16mm; 1/80sec at f/8, ISO 100. A polariser was used to increase the sky's colour saturation. LEFT: a telephoto was used to compress the spaces between the flower heads and create a denser carpet of colour, and bring the trees and poppies closer together in the frame. Canon 70-200mm f/4 at 105mm; 1/15sec at f/13, ISO 100.



→ look across the field of poppies, the flowers in the distance look denser because of the angle of view. Here you are able to see more green vegetation between the poppies that are closest to you, but the further away you look all you see is red. Using a telephoto is particularly useful if the field of poppies are not very dense or if you want to compress features in the scene such as trees. I exposed the scene at 1/15sec at f/13 to have enough depth-of-field.

UNUSUAL ANGLES

My final technique is using unusual angles to get a completely different perspective on the poppies. Using a low angle to get a 'bug's eye view' shooting up to the sky is a great way to create an image out of the typical views of poppies. This is really fun, as you never really know what you will come up with. I fitted the camera with a 16-35mm lens set at 16mm, and placed the camera on the ground facing upwards so there was no need for a tripod. With this technique I am literally shooting



LEFT: a 16mm wide-angle lens and a small aperture of f/22 were combined to create the depth in this shot of poppies and ox-eye daisies. A polarising filter helped lift the contrast and saturation of the sky. BELOW: A long lens and wide aperture (f/4 on a 200mm) were combined to isolate the subject from the surroundings. The soft focus effect were added afterwards in post-processing.



blind, as I can't look through the viewfinder on my Canon 5D Mark II, or even use the Live View to see what is in the frame; circumstances like this would really benefit from an LCD display that articulates. I propped the camera up by resting the lens on a filter wallet and used a polarising filter to darken the blue sky, giving it more saturation and colour contrast between the red and blues. It's best if you shoot away from the sun keeping it at a 90 degree angle to the camera to get the best polarisation - remember to be aware of flare from the sun (if we ever get any!) Composing and calculating the exposure can be tricky, and is something you have to work at to get it right. After doing the initial composition, I adjusted the camera and moved the plants until I obtained the composition and was happy with, and compensated for, the exposure as necessary. My exposure was 1/80sec at f/8. For something a bit more dramatic you can shoot at this angle but point the camera towards the sun, this time use your pop-up or

hotshoe-mounted Speedlite to light the flowers. You'll need to experiment with flash exposure compensation, or add a little extra flash power to get the balance right, and perhaps a dab of minus exposure compensation in-camera. Give it a try and see how striking the images can be.

So when you are scouring the countryside in search of those flashes of red, remember to try these three simple techniques to create your picture perfect poppies.

POSSIBLE POPPY FIELDS

It's difficult to know where a poppy field will be from one year to the next - unless it is left untouched by farmers. When farmers leave a field fallow to restore its fertility, this gives poppy seeds time to germinate if they are present. I have photographed good fields in Norfolk, Gloucestershire around the Cotswolds area and in Yorkshire near York. Rather than waste lots of petrol searching for poppies that may not be there this year, search the internet first so you won't be

disappointed. There are many websites that will tell you during poppy season where the best fields are in the country, and you can even ask if anyone has seen any near where you live.

One good site is www.wildaboutbritain.co.uk

BIOGRAPHY

Originally a commercial photographer, Tom Mackie specialised in industrial and architectural work in America. In 1985 Tom moved to the UK and made his mark on the landscape photography community, through his distinctive use of colour and light. Tom shoots with digital, panoramic and large format equipment, and also runs his own workshops around the world.

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