

“Meadow Diving”

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I'm a big advocate of using a tripod for every image I possibly can. I believe that my compositions get better, I make exposure choices with more thought, and sharpness and image quality are greatly improved. Plus there are many types of images that are simply impossible to make without a tripod.

There are occasions however, when forgoing the tripod is not only fun, but can also yield some unique and rewarding images.



One thing I occasionally enjoy, especially in flower season, is something I call “meadow-diving.” It’s a close-up photography technique using a close-up lens or perhaps a zoom lens with supplementary close-up lenses (often called diopters) attached. Set your lens for its maximum magnification and use your widest aperture. This will give you the faster shutter speeds that you’ll need to stop both camera and subject motion. Be aware that this will also give you a very shallow depth of field.



With this technique, you “dive” into your subject, creating close-up abstracts of the insides of flowers, dandelion puff-balls, grasses, or anything you like. Disable your auto-focus and don’t use your focusing ring. Move yourself and the camera back and forth to focus, firing the shutter when you see what you like in the viewfinder. Try to have at least one point of sharp focus in your image, as our eyes need something to focus on. Keep in mind the shallow depth of field and try to keep the film plane (the back of the camera) parallel with your subject to maximize depth of field if the subject calls for that.

With this technique, it is important to work with graphics in your compositions, using lines, curves, and shapes. Also remember the oft-used rule of thirds: divide your viewfinder with imaginary lines a third of the way across the viewfinder, both horizontally and vertically, like a tic-tac-toe board, and place your main subject near one of the intersecting points. The tendency when handholding is to center the main subject. Try to avoid doing this; your compositions will improve as a result. Pay careful attention to the edges and corners. Dark, blank corners can be a distraction.

Be extra aware of your exposure choices too. You’ll often be filling the frame with your subject. If your subject is a light yellow flower, for instance, your camera’s meter will want to render it a medium tone—medium yellow is often just dull and dingy looking. The problem gets worse if you’re photographing a white flower. If you’re “diving” into a deep purple flower, your meter will want to make that medium too, and the nice rich purple will become a washed out medium purple instead of a nice deep dark purple. So remember to overexpose the lighter tones and underexpose the darker tones. You can do this by

shooting in the manual mode and setting your exposure accordingly, or if you want to use an auto-exposure mode, by dialing in the proper compensation.

These kind of abstract images can be a lot of fun and will also be one of a kind; on a tripod you can create multiple copies (in-camera dupes if you’re using film) of the same scene or subject, but the very nature of this hand-held technique insures that just about every image will be unique.

You’ll need plenty of light for the fast shutter speed required, so bright sunny days will give you the speeds you’ll need. How fast, you ask. Well, as fast as you can get. To eliminate any camera movement, the general rule of thumb for handholding is to use a shutter speed of $1/\text{focal length}$ of the lens you’re using. You may even want to increase that for these close-ups. I’ve had good success using my 105mm at $1/125$ of a second and faster.

I often use this technique on days where a slight breeze makes photographing close ups otherwise impossible. I’ll just dive in, look for compositions, and then wait for the right moment to trip the shutter. Granted, I get plenty of images destined for the wastebasket, but I also come away with some real keepers.

So get out there, explore, get your knees dirty and see what you can find.





The natural beauty Rod Barbee discovered during backpacking trips into Olympic National Park led him to nature photography. A NatureScapes.Net columnist, Rod is a professional nature photographer and writer with numerous publishing credits. He has taught nature photography through various organizations. Please visit his website at www.rodbarbee.com.

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