

10 Tips to Better Orchid Photographs

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Taking acceptable orchid photographs is easier than you think. There is more to just having a "good camera". Often the difference between a good and great photograph comes down to a little bit of planning, patience and maintenance. After all, I personally don't consider myself a "photographer", more an orchid grower who likes taking photographs!

We are fortunate that in Australia we have some very fine orchid photographers. They all have a slightly different "style" and area of expertise. I regard David Titmuss as the finest photographer of miniature orchids in the world. He has taken countless brilliant shots of some of the really tiny orchids, such as species of *Bulbophyllum*, *Dendrobium*, *Dendrochilum*, *Oberonia* and a number of the small Australian *Sarcanthinae*. It always is a joy to see blown up on the screen flowers which are (in real life) only a few millimetres tall. David is also the one person who took the time and effort to teach me how to take good photos in the early 1990's, to which I am most grateful. Chris Nicholas from Hobart, Tasmania has written a few articles on photographing orchids. Chris uses natural light and uses long time exposures to extract as much "depth of field" that he can. Chris generally uses a sky blue background and takes fine shots of small-growing orchids, particularly *Masdevallia* species and hybrids. These are often of the whole plant in bloom. Gary Yong Gee, from Brisbane, Queensland is a most versatile photographer, who produces exceptional images both with use of flash (often ringflash) or natural light. I have been most impressed with Gary's portraits of numerous *Dendrobium* and vandaceous species.

I exclusively use Kodachrome 64 slide film for all my orchid photographs. It gives honest colour reproduction and has good archival qualities. Many other brands tend to "enhance" the colours (particularly blues and reds) and the slides do fade with age.

If taking photos at an orchid meeting, don't forget to ask the owner for permission to photograph his or her plant. Sometimes they may let you move the plant, so you will not bump the other exhibits. Take an extra shot for the owner. They will be most pleased (and you should not have any problems with future requests).

Here are my "10 Tips to Better Orchid Photographs".

1. Camera. You will need a single lens reflex camera. "Point and Shoot" or "Happysnap" disposable cameras will rarely do the job for you. This gives you a camera for which you can interchange different lenses so you (and your photos) can adapt to various situations. There are many fine brands available. I use a Nikon F-301. I've had it for over 10 years and it has taken literally thousands of photos. I always use my camera on the manual settings, this way you have total control over what you do. Automatic focus and settings are better when taking shots of orchid displays, but rarely work for close-up photos.

2. Macro lens. This really is a must for taking close-up photographs. From the Nikon line, I use a 60 mm Micro Nikkor. It has a range from f 32 to f 2.8. This enables you to get up "close and personal" with the flower. For tiny flowers I use a x2 converter between the lens and the camera, and reduce the setting by two stops.

3. Ringflash. One of the best things I ever bought. This specialised flash screws onto the end of the lens and operates on a separate power pack, running off four AA batteries. (A battery recharger and rechargeable batteries are a sound investment here.) Mine is an Elicar Auto Macro-8. I also have the dedicated Nikon version as back-up. I ringflash gives you photographs without shadows and an even light throughout the flower. It is less effective for shots of large plants in full flower, as the lighting will be correct for the front of the plant, then the rest of the exhibit fades into darkness. The use of a ringflash is a must, in my opinion, for portraits of close-up orchid flowers. Over 90% of my photos (and most of my published shots) were taken with a ringflash.

4. Tripod. A sturdy tripod is a must when photographing native orchids in the wild. I rarely use one when using a ringflash. (I have a steady hand and hold my breath when I take photos!) When using natural light a tripod should be used to help increase the depth of field. If you have a bright room in the home, this could be a good place to take photos. It certainly eliminates the movement factor due to wind. Try to avoid photos late in the day, as you may get more "rustic" tones due to the position of the afternoon sun.

5. Background. An otherwise good photograph can be crucified by a poor background. I cringe when I see shots with clothes lines, back fences, brick walls, garbage bins etc. in view. They take the focus away from the flower. Remember, the best background is the one that doesn't distract you. I like to use black material as a background for most of my photos. Sky blue is popular, but avoid "loud" colours! Have a spare piece which you can transport to meetings, shows etc. I rarely use a background when photographing native orchids, as I prefer the "natural" effect.

6. Subject. A little bit of "grooming" may be required here. Firstly, select flowers in good condition. Use sticky tape to get problem leaves out of the way. Take labels out of pots. If the pot is not black, cover it with black material or put it inside another black pot. For tiny flowers, check for equally tiny insects, remove spider webs etc. Sadly, these are sometimes not seen until you get the slides back. Then you can see the "monsters" on the flowers!

7. Fill the frame. Get as close as you can to the flower to fill the frame. Sadly at Judging Panel meetings, we are often entertained by photos of awarded orchids (from all States) that are very "distant". You pay for the film, use it all up! Nothing is worse than seeing a single flower with a thick border of "nothing" around it. Look through the viewfinder to see if it is best photographed vertical (portrait) or horizontal (landscape). If you are not sure, take both!

8. Take Notes. Keep a notebook to record the names of plants photographed and what *f* stop and shutter speeds were used. If using natural light, record the conditions (sunny, overcast etc) This will prove a most valuable reference when you get your slides back. You will get a feel for what works (and what

doesn't!). Remember to label your slides. The ultra fine point black "Pilot SC-UF" is my first choice for a permanent marker. I am now labelling a lot of my slides using the "Avery Laser L7656 Labels". This is used through a program in Microsoft Word (go from "Tools" to "Envelopes and Labels"). How you label the slides is a matter of choice. For species orchids I include the name (in Bold italics), Country of Origin, initials of owner of plant and finally the photographers name and the year. You can change this around to suit yourself.

9. "Bracket" photos. Experience (and your note book) will give you the best idea on the optimum exposure to take your photographs. All my "ring-flash" shots are taken at 125th of a second. What I can modify is the *f* stop. As an example, most of my "exhibition style" *Paphiopedilum* hybrids are taken at *f* 13.5. White or pale green flowers are better at *f* 16, and darker colours, such as reds at *f* 11. So what is "bracketing"? Once I have the subject ready and I think it would be best at, say *f* 13.5, I will take that shot then one a small stop either side, say *f* 16 and *f* 11. These days I tend to work in a narrower band, and may take four shots at *f* 12 *f* 13 *f* 14 and *f* 15. I like to keep at least two "shots" of the same subject. One slightly under-exposed (which are better for reproduction in books, magazines etc.) and one "spot on" for slide shows.

10. Storage. Housing your photographic collection can present a few problems as your collection starts to grow. Remember, dust and light are your worst enemies here. I use wooden slide boxes (each box holds about 500 images). Most of my collection is kept this way. I also use plastic slide sleeves (for non-orchid slides), and these are kept in a filing cabinet.

We are forever learning more about photography. It is most important to learn from your successes as well as your failures. The main thing is to enjoy your photography. It certainly added another dimension to my interest in orchids. I hope these tips may help you take better orchid photos. I just wish that the film was cheaper!





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