



SNAP DECISIONS

Photographer **John Campbell** gives advice on getting the best images of your projects

As a garden designer, you need to capture and catalogue your work to show potential clients your style and market your business, from displaying on your website and social media, to the holy grail of a large beautiful garden feature in a high-end lifestyle magazine. Photographs of completed projects are the obvious way to do this, but how do you get the best images?

Most people, especially visually gifted people like designers, like to have a go themselves and these days we all take lots of photos on mobile phones. Your phone may be amazing, but most of them can't take images that are a good enough to, say, print in a magazine like this one as a large feature. The image probably won't be 'high-

resolution' enough – this means that it is low quality and it will print fuzzy. Lower quality images can still look fine on your website or social media, but for printing in a magazine, they need to be at least 300 pixels per inch, or PPI. Basically, the higher the resolution of a photograph, the larger its potential print size will be.

Getting technical

To explain this, I need to first explain megapixels – a term you have probably seen in camera or smart phone ads. A megapixel is 1 million pixels, the small squares that are put together, like pieces of a puzzle, or mosaic, to create your photograph. The resolution of your image will be determined in large part by how many of

ABOVE Professional photographers have the kit, knowledge, skill and experience to capture atmospheric shots like this one of Knoll Gardens, which won 2nd prize in the International Garden Photographer of the Year 'Beautiful Gardens' Competition 2020

these tiny squares are packed together in a small space, such as in an inch. So, an 8 megapixel camera would have roughly eight million tiny squares of information per inch. A camera phone at 1.5 megapixels (1.5MP) would only have one and a half million squares of information per inch.

What does that mean for your photos? Simply put, the more information the better. The more information squeezed into an area – the more PPI – the better our eyes blend the edges together, to create a complete image. If too little information is available, the eye will notice the jagged edges of the pixels where they meet – pixelation – just as you see the individual squares of mosaic tile designs.

If you use a 5MP camera, it will only be able to print a 8.5 x 6.4 inch picture at 300 PPI. This may be ok for a picture on your mantelpiece, but when it comes to magazines, the editor will probably want a large, stunning image for a double-page spread, and this may need to be 18 inches wide, so an 8-inch-wide image won't work.

The number of megapixels is only one aspect to consider when talking about the quality of a photo that a camera



Image: Royal Collection Trust © HM Queen Elizabeth II 2020



Photos: John Campbell



John Campbell

is a photographer and film maker who began to specialise in gardens in 2013. A career highlight was seeing his work displayed on the giant digital billboards of Times Square, but he is just as happy shooting features for magazines, projects for garden designers and products for horticultural companies.

@room_of_light

is capable of producing. Factors such as camera sensor and processor and the optical quality of the lens will play equally important roles. But to take really beautiful, high-quality images, you'll need more than a camera.

Kitted out

My basic kit includes two full frame DSLR cameras, a tripod, a remote shutter release and interchangeable high-quality lenses, including a wide lens for capturing wide shots, a macro lens for close-ups of plants and flowers, and a zoom lens to get into those hard-to-reach places, like deep borders, without trampling all over everything. The tripod and the remote shutter release are used so that when I take photos, I'm not moving the camera, which would result in blurry images. This is most important when shooting at dawn and dusk, as most of us garden photographers do, as at these times there is less light, so the exposures need to be a lot longer.

High-end equipment and in-depth knowledge are just some of the reasons why it's a good idea to outsource your project photography to a professional

photographer, preferably a specialist garden photographer. Even though your clients could just make their own garden, you want them to choose to use a garden designer like you, because you are an expert, specialised in what you do, and can therefore offer a much better result. It is exactly the same with garden photographers. They will have the kit, technical know-how, skill, eye and experience to shoot gardens, landscapes and plants. They shoot in a format called RAW, which captures a lot more detail, and then expertly process the images, the treatment of which is just as necessary, and can be just as important, as clicking the shutter.

Garden photographers have diverse styles and operate in different ways, so see whose work you are attracted to in magazines and online, check out their websites and social media, and get in touch to see how they do things and if you might like to work together. Be sure you understand what image rights and permissions you would have; for example, if you can use the images on your website, or in awards entries.

ABOVE Gardens with restricted access, even if not quite as grand as Buckingham Palace, require careful prior organisation with clients. From John Campbell's upcoming book, *Buckingham Palace: A Royal Garden* **OPPOSITE, LEFT** A macro lens is needed to take close-up photographs of plants **RIGHT** Shooting into the light can give flare with flair, such as here on Chris Beardshaw's 2018 RHS Chelsea Best in Show winning garden, which Campbell was commissioned to document for sponsor Morgan Stanley

Ask first, shoot later

If you do book a professional shoot of one of your projects, make sure the owners of the garden are involved. They are going to be inconvenienced by the photographer turning up at odd times and taking over their space, so it's a good idea to get them on board. If the photographer can just walk in through a garden gate, this isn't a problem, but if there is only access through the house, someone is going to have to get up at 4am to let them in. Also, with wealthy clients or larger gardens open to the public, or commercial projects, there can be a security issue, and early or late access is not possible, or a staff member will have to be paid to open or lock up the site.

Another issue is that garden photography obviously depends on the

weather. You decide the shoot will be in June, and book it in for the first or second week, but the photographer can't say which day until closer to the time. They will check on the weather and let you know when might work. But it can be hit and miss. There might be rain or wind, or dark clouds, so it might take a few tries to get it right. This is why you need your client to be really invested in the shoot too.

As well as this, you don't want to find out down the line that there is a problem with using the photos, so make sure the client understands and agrees to the exposure it might create for them, and that they can put terms on usage if they wish, such as not revealing the location or showing views of the house.

Next, make sure you have chosen the best time to shoot. Is the garden grown in enough, and at its seasonal peak? It's important to let gardens mature before photographing them. Of course, some gaps are inevitable, and a good photographer can easily mask little gaps and spaces in beds in how they shoot, but not gaping holes right at the front. Bare soil distracts the eye in a photograph, and can make a garden look patchy. Just before the shoot, it is a good idea to plant fillers into those obvious gaps.

Visit the garden just before the shoot, to give it that last bit of TLC. Have the lawns cut, the hedges clipped and edges done. Deadhead everything, wash hardscaping, take leaves off gravel paths, tidy away toys, and roll up hoses out of the way. Then you have done everything you can to make sure you get a beautiful set of images.

My last piece of advice is to get a high-quality portrait shot taken, and make sure you update it every few years. People like to put a face to a name, and a professional portrait sends the right message. ○

Turn over for more expert tips from some of the world's top garden photographers

“THERE MIGHT BE RAIN OR WIND, AND IT MIGHT TAKE A FEW TRIES TO GET IT RIGHT. SO YOU NEED YOUR CLIENT TO BE INVESTED IN THE SHOOT TOO”



PRO TIP 01

JASON INGRAM

“The best lighting for most gardens and plants tends to be when the direction of the sun is coming into the lens, in other words, backlighting the subject. If you imagine a clock face and the light is positioned at 10 past the hour or 10 to the hour that will create an element of backlighting and the subject matter will really stand out and give you the layers of colour, texture and design at its best.”

@jasoningram



Beautifully back-lit planting at Hauser & Wirth’s Oudolf Garden in Somerset

Photo: Jason Ingram

PRO TIP 02

ANDREA JONES

“Make informed decisions on when to photograph, based on plant performance and the weather. There’s always the odd occasion when you have to make the best of it – when I photographed Tom Stuart-Smith’s prairie garden, the forecast had been good, but when a fog descended I had to wait and hope that sun would break through. It did – and the fog softened the light, yet intensified the colours. Blue skies aren’t all they’re cracked up to be!”

@andreaJones gardenphotography

A diffusing fog added atmosphere to Tom Stuart-Smith’s prairie



Photo: Andrea Jones

PRO TIP 04

RICHARD BLOOM

“If you are documenting your projects for social media, try to get an elevated position to capture an overview that can show the structure and overall design. This could be from an upstairs window, roof or a tall ladder. Make sure to take a photo in both landscape and portrait format, as portrait often works best for Instagram. Small to medium-sized town gardens work particularly well shot this way.”

@richardbloomphoto



This geometric design by Arne Maynard was best captured from an elevated angle

Photo: Richard Bloom



Photo: Clive Nichols

Morton Hall in Worcestershire photographed looking towards the sun at 8pm on a sunny day with a zoom lens

PRO TIP 03

CLIVE NICHOLS

“The biggest mistake people make when photographing gardens is that they assume that just because the weather is nice and sunny they can get their camera or phone out. This can result in really contrast-y images with burnt out highlights and deep, inky black shadows, because, although a scene may look good to your eye, the camera doesn’t record it in quite the same way. It’s much better to get up early and take pictures during the ‘golden hour’ – first thing in the morning, or late into the evening when the sun is at a low angle, colours are much richer and shadows rake across the scene, adding three dimensionality. If you shoot in the daytime, choose days when there is some cloud – which acts like a large soft box – so that contrast is reduced on your garden subjects.”

@clivenichols

A photograph evokes what it is like to be there, on this roof garden designed by Tony Woods MSGD



Photo: Marianne Majerus

PRO TIP 05

MARIANNE MAJERUS

“For me, a garden photograph is successful when it achieves a fine synthesis between showing off the design and evoking the pleasure of being in the space created by the designer. It makes the designer’s vision come alive in ways that even the designer might not have fully anticipated.”

@mariannemajerus