



Photography of Peony Flowers

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You don't need to have a fancy camera, editing software, or years of experience to take great pictures of peonies. Being an expert in the field of photography is not necessary either to produce excellent images, simple enthusiasm will suffice. This article is meant to address common issues most peony photographers deal with on a regular basis and can provide the first steps in creating an understanding how better images can be taken. Further tips and tricks can be found from articles, books, and photographers, that will help take your photos to the next level.

First and foremost, before taking a picture is composition. Composition is defined as the placement of objects and elements in the photo. If composition is poor, it can ruin a photo, making something as beautiful as a peony flower seem dull and uninteresting. Conversely, great composition can take something that may appear boring and turn into something of interest. You may think that a "good" composition is one that is the most pleasing to look at and shows your subject in a flattering manner, but that is not always the case. If you're interested in knowing more about composition, there are a many excellent books and articles on the matter.

For this article, the composition goal will be to produce photos that would be used for submission to the APS, as part of registering a new peony. The production and submission of a suitable image is important, as it will serve as a reference for many users around the world. While an image may not be easily used for identification, having a good representation on file is a helpful tool in conjunction with a description.

For starters, a singular flower should be the main focal point in the photo, with the secondary goal to eliminate or minimize as many distracting elements as possible (e.g., insects, leaves, other flowers, hands, etc.). Find the best-looking flower on the plant, one that has a nice representation of its petal color and form, with no damaged petals, or pollen being shed. Peony flowers do not always present themselves well every day, and for photographic purposes, it is advisable to revisit the plant another day or year, if a good representation is not available. Additionally, the angle of your camera to the flower can very much change the feel of the composition, thus look for an angle that will show off all of the flower variables, mentioned above, as well as other identifying attributes if present (e.g., carpels, stigmas, anthers, sheath, disk). It is important to portray the entire flower in focus, so that no part is blurry in any way. This can be tricky on windy days and many people will want to use their hands to steady the stem and flower, which may be a distraction in the photo. The use of a large piece of cardboard, as a windbreak, can be a rather effective alternative to combat flower movement while taking a picture.



Figure 1: 'Origin of Serenity'

Figure 1 is a good example of a centered bloom, which looks very fresh, is representative of the cultivar, and has very few distracting elements that may take away from the aesthetic and technical value of the image.

Figure 2 presents a messy petal form and may not show an accurate representation of the flower. However, if

a plant consistently produces flowers of this configuration, then it is fine to show it off in the image. The insect present on the flower's anthers is a distraction, as is the background. The presence of both soil and foliage in this image's background is not consistent and could be considered a fault. **Figure 3**, has two distracting elements in the composition, one being the leaf covering part of the flower, and two, having recently rained, the flower's surface appearance has been somewhat affected.



Figure 2: 'Seedling'

Lighting, another key component, can greatly affect a photograph's quality and color. The time of day and weather can have dramatic impacts on the exposure and color tone represented in the photo. Color is very much subjective and depends on physical, physiological, and psychological factors of the photographer and viewer. How color is perceived by each person is different and the same goes for camera -- they are not as good at adapting and capturing the different lighting conditions as the human eye. Furthermore, computers, cell phones, and other electronics can also affect how we perceive the color of a photo, and when combining these factors, color representation becomes a very complicated matter.

Additionally, color in peonies can also be affected year to year by temperatures and variable climate conditions. Numerous

examples of color variation, portrayed in images, can be viewed on social media platforms. These images often produce many comments about color, which can be useful, but also rather frustrating, due to the number of variables that are in play.

One way lighting can affect a photo is by changing how "warm" or "cool" the temperature of the image will be. For example, reds, oranges, and yellows are often perceived as warm and blues and violets as cool. **Figure 2** would be considered by most people as having a 'cool' temperature to the overall photo, while **Figure 3** would have more of a 'warm' temperature. Ideally, the photos the APS is looking for are somewhere in the middle of 'warm' and 'cool' temperature. One method to help correct colors in photo editing is taking a small piece paper, tag board, or fabric that is colored 'middle grey,' place it near the flower so it has roughly the same lighting conditions, and snap a photo. Add the image to the photo editing program to correct color balances, and apply those color levels to the flower images before editing further. This may take a bit of extra effort, but will produce more accurate images. Some cameras will have white balance presets and leaving it on AUTO will produce great results, but there may be times the above method is necessary.



Figure 3: 'Hillary'



Figure 4: 'Seedling'



Figure 5: 'Seedling'

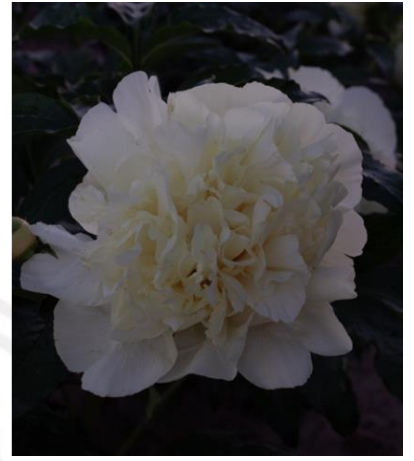


Figure 6: 'Seedling'

Another way different types of lighting can affect a photo is through exposure. Exposure by definition is “the amount of light per unit area reaching a photographic film or electronic image sensor, as determined by shutter speed, lens aperture, and scene luminance,” which is quite a mouthful. For more information, do an online search, or consult a photography book about the “exposure triangle”. Ideally, the photographer will want to capture an image that optimizes the useful dynamic range of their camera with a gentle gradation from the shadows to highlight (i.e., the photo won't have any harsh shadows or extreme highlights).

Figure 4 demonstrates how lighting can create a harsh contrast within the flower and make it more difficult to discern its color. **Figure 5** demonstrates a photo that is 'overexposed'. Detail becomes lost in the lighter areas and appears washed out in the flower. **Figure 6** demonstrates when a photo is 'underexposed' and the colors look muddled and detail is lost in the darker areas. **Figure 1** demonstrates an evenly lit balanced photo, lacking harsh contrast. The photo is neither extremely over- or under-exposed. A good tip to photographing peonies is to take pictures in the shade or during overcast days, which will give an even lighting and not create harsh contrast in the photo. If all that is available is a full sun situation, using a piece of cardboard to block out the sun can help. When assistance is available, a white piece of semi-transparent fabric to diffuse the light can be held over the area being photographed, while the photographer is capturing the desired flower image.

A number of considerations should be made if images are to be edited. Most people will capture photos in one of two main formats: JPEG or RAW. When using the JPEG format, it is important to know that depending on the brand/maker of the photo capturing device, there will be a different JPEG engine. This essentially means the device will take a raw unedited image, process the photo and change the colors to give the desired saturation, hue and luminance. Each brand maker has a different design for these color enhancements, which inevitably will cause variation between photos of the same subject. This is yet another way color can be subjective, as not everyone is using the same device to capture images. Additionally, when editing, the goal for the APS is to have photos that show the peony with the most “accurate” coloring. While it is tempting to bump up the saturation or vibrancy to make the photo really “pop,” it may leave the viewer with an even more inaccurate depiction of the subject. However, colors may need minor adjustment, to provide a more natural presentation, due to variability in color interpretations of the camera. For example, many cameras tend to oversaturate reds, causing a lack of detail in the images. While this factor can be edited to make an image look a little better, it is recommended photos be composed so that reds and similar colors are not



Figure 7: 'Charismatic'

'blown out' prior to editing. **Figure 7** is an example of red coloration incorrectly interpreted by a camera. Again, the camera brand and maker may impact how reds are presented in an image.

Digital cameras allow the user to take many images at no additional cost. Taking many pictures with variations in settings and compositions is an excellent tactic, which can provide a better chance of producing an acceptable image. Be patient and keep trying new ways to look at the subjects of your choice. Eventually, you'll find techniques that work well for your style of photography. As skills develop, read books, articles, watch videos, or talk to other photographers to broaden your tool box for better outcomes. There is a wealth of information available to better enhance the beauty and accuracy of peony images. Photography is more than a destination, but rather, a fantastic journey that will be enjoyed for a lifetime.

About the Author's Photography Beginnings:

As a kid, I was always fascinated with photography and art, but never had the money to have my own camera. I would borrow my mom's or grandma's point-and-shoot camera and go off and take pictures of the different plants and flowers. It wasn't until my third year of university that I scraped enough money together (barely) to get a very used, and still very dear, camera of my own. Looking back at those times, I cringe a little at the photos I took with poor lighting, focus, and composition. My photo editing was rather cliché at the time, but thought it 'cool'. How things have changed! However, I wouldn't trade that experience for the world. As time went by, the experience I gained allowed me to take wonderful images. The journey is not over, as I continue to grow with each image taken.

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