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Good Pictures in Bad Conditions

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Soft light, neatly manicured garden beds, a sense of mystery and discovery are all things we wish for when we photograph gardens. But all too often the sun's too bright, it's raining, the daffodils need deadheading, or there are weeds lurking about when we arrive — with a deadline breathing down our necks. Here are some favorite tools and techniques for working in almost any conditions.

General Tools

- Tripod
- Cable or wireless remote release

Working from a tripod does several things. It frees up your hands to hold light modifiers, as well as letting you examine the edges of the frame for distracting elements.

Bright Mid-day Sun

The problem with bright sun is excess contrast between the illuminated and shadowed areas of the photo. Our goal is to reduce contrast.

- Polarizing filter: cuts glare on foliage, as well as darkening blue skies
- Diffuser: acts like a cloud, softening the light, reducing light in bright areas and adding light to the shadows
- Blue sky background: including a blue sky helps the viewer accept higher contrast because we associate blue skies with pleasant sunny days
- Low camera position: sometimes works in conjunction with a blue sky
- Backlight: shoot toward the sun, allowing light to come through foliage or blossoms
- Sidelight: place the camera so the light strikes the side of your subject, accenting edges, form, and texture
- HDR (high dynamic range) processing: make multiple exposures of the same composition at different exposures and blend with software to balance exposure for the bright and dark areas. Often up to 7 exposures at one-stop increments. I blend with one of three tools: LR/Infuse, Photomatix (Photoshop plugin), or Photoshop's native HDR tool. Sometimes one tool generates a better result than another.

Wind

- Compose and wait for brief pause between gusts
- Slow shutter speed and capture movement as a blur
- High ISO and high shutter speed to freeze motion

Rain

- Camera under shelter, looking out to rain environment
- Umbrella
- Commercial camera cover
- Improvised camera cover (plastic grocery bag, plastic wrap)

Snowing

- Same as rain for camera protection
- Higher shutter speed to minimize snowflake blurs

Deep Shade

- Long exposures
- Custom white balance

Nearly Dark

- Long exposures
- Custom white balance or creative use of white balance

Weeds

- Compose the shot, then weed what's in the frame