Photographing Daffodils

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Photographing daffodils, or any other flowers, can add to the enjoyment of your hobby. First, you must decide what you want from the photo. Do you want a close-up record of the flower? Or do you want a photo of a lovely scene in your garden? Different results require different techniques.

Let's talk first about close-up flower photos. I use a 35-mm, single lens reflex camera. This type of camera has interchangeable lenses. Some people use a macro lens; I have mostly used the screw on lenses called diopters. These come in +1, +2, and +3 strength. These can be used separately or together to get even closer. If you want extreme close-ups, say of the anthers or the very center of the flower, you can also use a reversing ring. This allows you to attach the lens to the camera backwards.

I have used several types of flash. My first flash was a lower power unit that mounted on the camera. It runs on battery power, but can also be plugged into a wall outlet. If I'm taking a lot of photos at a time, I'll set up a "studio" in my kitchen. I use a black velvet backdrop taped to the side of the refrigerator, then put the daffodil in a vase in front of it. I use the black velvet because it doesn't show shadows in the background. This "studio" is usually in place throughout daffodil season. I put the camera, with the flash attached, on a tripod and I'm ready to go. In my kitchen "studio," I also use a cable release. I have found that when I photograph miniature flowers, the flash is too powerful, so I put a Kleenex over the flash to diffuse the light. Later I got a more powerful flash which "talks" to my camera and sets the shutter speed. But sometimes I still have to put a Kleenex over the flash. With both of these flash units, there is a shadow on the flower where the cup shades the perianth on the side opposite the flash. Recently I acquired a ring flash. This flash mounts around the lens, so that the light is evenly distributed around the flower. I have to set the shutter speed manually. Occasionally, when the flower is looking straight at the camera, there is a slight shadow distortion around the cup. So I usually place the flower at a slight angle from the camera. Not a complete side view, but a slight angle. And I try to fill the frame.

Since I'm shooting close to the flower, I usually use a slow film, like ASA 25, with an aperture of f16. This gives good depth of field, with the entire flower in sharp focus—assuming of course, that I have focused correctly!

Different types of film render the color differently. Kodak's Kodachrome is very good with yellows and reds, but Fuji's Velvia gives deeper concentrations of color. This is a favorite of landscape photographers, because of the color saturation. As it's ASA 50, I set the aperture to f11, when I use it for close-ups with flash because I have learned this combination, with the ring flash I'm using, gives me good photos. If you want to photograph indoors without flash, be sure to buy film which is designed for tungsten lighting. Kodak makes an ASA 160 tungsten film. This film is designed to work with indoor lighting. If you have fluorescent lights, you need a filter on your camera. Fluorescent lighting gives a greenish, unnatural cast to your photos. Outdoor film used indoors without flash will give your photos a yellow-orange cast. Of course, if you have perfect light coming in the window, by all means use outdoor film. And be sure to use a tripod. Film selection is especially important, as there's little you can do to change a slide, short of duplicating the slide (on a piece of equipment whose name escapes me) and changing the color balance. If you're using print film, and don't use the proper light source for the film, tell the processor. They can adjust the color when prints are made.

When I take photos in the garden, I try to fill the frame with a small area of the garden. I've found that no matter how often I try for an overall garden shot, the resulting print is not what I visualized. It gets lost in a 4 x 6 print. A garden shot on a slide sometimes works better, because you can project it to a large size. So fill the frame with interesting things. A 200 speed film works well for garden shots.

My family surprised me with a digital camera for Christmas. I'm still learning the intricacies, but it's great to go out and take a photo of something in the garden, and then send it immediately by email to a friend. But the rules I learned for my SLR don't apply to the digital! I'm learning to concentrate on getting a good exposure, and then make the close-up with software. All my efforts to get a digital close-up directly in the camera have come out way over exposed.

And practice, practice, practice! When you were a kid, you had to practice your multiplication tables. Or your Mom made you practice your music lessons. Taking good photos takes practice, too. When you take photos, record the combination of flash, film, shutter speed, and aperture you used. That way you'll know what combination pleases you and gives good results. Then you won't have to worry whether your shot will come out when you take a photo of that perfect flower. You'll know it will, because you've practiced!

(The photo is of 'Fire-Blade', taken on Fuji Velvia film with a ring flash, shutter speed of 1/60, f11.)