

GROWERTALKS

Features

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Oh, Snap!

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1. This mugshot of *Hibiscus Holy Grail* shows a large red disk centered in the frame, surrounded by dark bronze leaves. Taken on a cloudy day, the center is clearly visible and the leaf textures don't become black smudges.

2. The significant feature of *Rudbeckia American Gold* is its mounding habit. The mugshot shows a simple *Black-eyed Susan*, so this photo is the one everyone publishes.

3. The sprig shot of *Pansy Cool Wave Frost* focuses attention on the critical detail by pinching every other detail out of the shot. The plant isn't important; the flower is. Cupping a hand around the flower achieves the same goal.

4. This habit of *Pycnanthemum flexuosum* is captured by stepping backwards from the tight white single disc of the mugshot. Snap the photo when the silhouette is clearly seen.

5. The container shot of *Begonia Hula Red* shows fellow professionals one way the plant can earn a paycheck. If landscape is the primary target, then build out garden beds.

6. This crop shot of *Basil Rutgers Devotion* encodes a lot of information for the trade. Growers see useful details inside these house photos. Even plug or juvenile crop shots are valuable.



As a plant photographer, I manage hundreds of thousands of images. In our industry, the photograph's role is a key link in the sales chain. I see it everywhere: growers swapping images like trading cards, breeders passing out photos like candy, sales reps flicking through shots on phones and tablets to explain new genetics. Catalogs have at least one photo for each entry, websites offer gallery slideshows for their plants and shopping carts measure the revenues.

"More pictures mean more sales," as one manager bluntly told me. "Give me what you got."

Now, if you're a breeder or a starting or finishing nursery, you probably have a big pile of photos that you're trying to organize. You've got questions. Not all photos are good photos, but which ones do you keep, which ones do you

offer and which ones can you throw out? Here are some answers to control the chaos.

Take the mug shot

First, create a folder, name it after the plant and populate it. Image 0001 in your folder should be the mug shot. Aim the phone straight onto the flower, almost filling the frame with color, but leaving a small collar of green around the silhouette. Snap. You've got the mug shot, the equivalent of a driver's license. What is this plant and what does it look like? Everyone up and down the supply chain needs this shot, so each plant in production should have one.

While you're there, take a step back and grab the habit shot (garden) or the pot shot (production). This image is valuable to industry insiders because the shape and nature of the full plant is a major concern for buyers. If you're in front of a handsome garden or a clean production line, take three steps back and grab that shot, too.

Grab as you go

Formal studio photos are done by big houses staffed with professionals. The rest of the industry shoots from the hip, although the number of planned cell phone shots I see has jumped. It turns out you can chase down those special shots without much trouble if you decide the task is important. Do a photo run through the greenhouse—it takes an hour or two, as long as you know where the good stuff is. Calendar timing is also critical; echinacea photos in March are not the same as echinacea photos in July, naturally. Pin the sweet spot and remember to send someone out with a cell phone when the plant is prime.

Greenhouses are great places for photos, especially on bright sunny days because the shade cloth or the glazing cuts down on the harsh aspects of direct sunlight. Colors are saturated and balanced, and the shadows are soft enough to provide volume.

Outdoors, sunny day photos are usually terrible. Cameras faithfully capture and enhance harsh stripes and dark pools caused by shadows. When shooting under the open sky, choose lightly overcast days that mimic the greenhouse look. If you can barely see your own shadow on the ground, conditions are perfect. If you see sharp edges, go back inside.

Experiencing a long string of sunny days? Skirt the issue by shooting around dusk or dawn when the light isn't as harsh and the low sun angle gives everything a slightly romantic glow. I've also taken product underneath trees, but shade dumps blues into the shot if uncorrected. Cell phones usually blue-shift to automatically keep the whites clean, but not always.

Promote the significant shot

The second image should emphasize the significant selling feature. All plants under production have to answer one basic question: Why? A gardener could spend their money on petunias, so why buy your product? If the color over the top is the reason, a mass shot should be moved into the image 0002 position. If the foliage is the A-game or the habit is outstanding, then that's the photo that should be image 0002.

Naming sequence is important. Assembly of catalogs, websites and shopping carts needs to happen fast. Staff commonly grab the first or second shot in a folder to illustrate a plant because they have hundreds of images and thousands of clicks to do before the end of the day. Play that routine to your advantage by making your best shots 0001 and 0002.

- 0001 Mug shot
- 0002 Significant feature shot
- 0003 Habit shot/Pot shot

■ 0004 Garden shot/Landscape shot

File names never change so crazy camera designations don't help. If you want echinacea to sort in the Es, stick with: Echinacea_cultivar_0001. The file name should be the plant name.

Throw out the worst shots

Don't keep all the photos; a few great shots is much better than hundreds of ho-hums. Out of focus? Throw it out. Trashy background? Throw it out. Pay attention to that background because growers often look past the plants and judge your establishment. When framing a shot let your eye go around the edges of the screen to make sure you don't see something you wouldn't want them to see, such as battered equipment, dead leaves or random bugs. Pollinators are okay.

It's fine to take lots of photos, but don't keep similars. These are shots where the camera wobbles just a little bit from image to image. Pick one and run with it—the one with the best focus and biggest colors—and get rid of the other hundred. My working rule limits folders to 25 images or less. It forces the cream to the top.

Equipment and specs

You may notice that I don't talk much about the technical details. This is because every modern cell phone has the chops to kick out perfectly good hi-res photos for nearly every situation as long as the light is good.

If you asked me right now for the best cell phone for the job I'd point to the current iPhone lineup. Apple throws a ton of money into their low light sensors, macro lenses and post-processing software. I hunt for my shots in dimly lit green-houses. High quality automatic settings matter, so, yeah, that's the camera I carry. Snap and run—snap and run—snap and run.

When exporting, pick JPG, highest quality and largest size available if your software asks. Some mail or SMS software shrinks photos into low-res files in order to send them through tiny Internet pipelines. If you're pushing out big folders with lots of files to other people you're probably already using Dropbox, OneDrive or Google Drive, or plain old thumb drives sent through Priority Mail. Professionals can always make a project work if they have too many pixels, so give them as much as you've got. **GT**

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