



TAKING A LOOK
THROUGH THE LENS

In the Rose Garden

WITH
SAXON HOLT

Saxon Holt has written a series of garden photography books called the PhotoBotanic Garden Photography Workshop to help photographers “see” the special challenges of photographing a garden, and how to develop one’s own style. He has adapted the lessons and techniques for a special photography book that is just about photographing roses.

In this exclusive excerpt from the new book *Photographing Roses*, Saxon talks about how rose photography in the garden is different than photographing individual blooms. The goal is to learn to appreciate how roses fit into the landscape. Your photos will improve vastly once you appreciate and have your photos reflect the roses in context. His new book and workshop books are available at PhotoBotanic.com



All photos and text by Saxon Holt. *Photographing Roses* is available at PhotoBotanic.com



Working in the Garden

Looking for photos is one of the great joys of garden photography. It can be a meditative process, distilling a grand garden experience down to images that tell a story of how the garden makes you feel.

Photographing roses in the garden, the queen flower in the plant kingdom, is its own special pleasure, but the techniques for photographing in gardens apply whether or not you are looking specifically for roses.

Be conscious of taking photos and keep these basic ideas in mind:

- Appreciate the garden and how the roses are used.
- Compose a good, balanced picture using the whole frame.
- Learn how to use the light.
- Tell a story, don't just grab a shot.

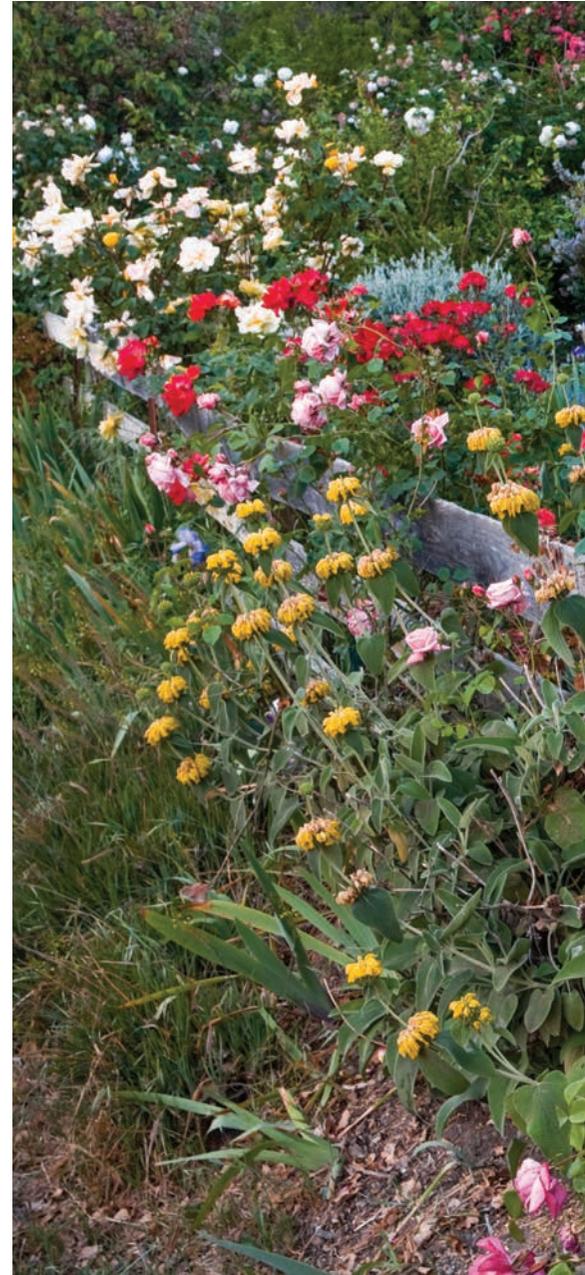
We are not looking just to capture the flower but its place in the garden. Try to communicate something of the garden's story and of its design. We see in the photograph above the beautiful lush rose garden with a pathway leading to the back door. That pathway is part of the story of the garden, you could imagine yourself walking down the path admiring the roses.

Learn to appreciate the many ways a garden can be put together and look for how the roses contribute to the particular garden you are photographing.

When you see this beautiful red 'Sophy's Rose', it is in context of the garden area with the cushions on the sofa beyond. This evokes a sense of being out on the patio, a life-style — it's not just a picture of the rose. Look to compose a photograph that includes specific parts of the garden that helps you tell a story.

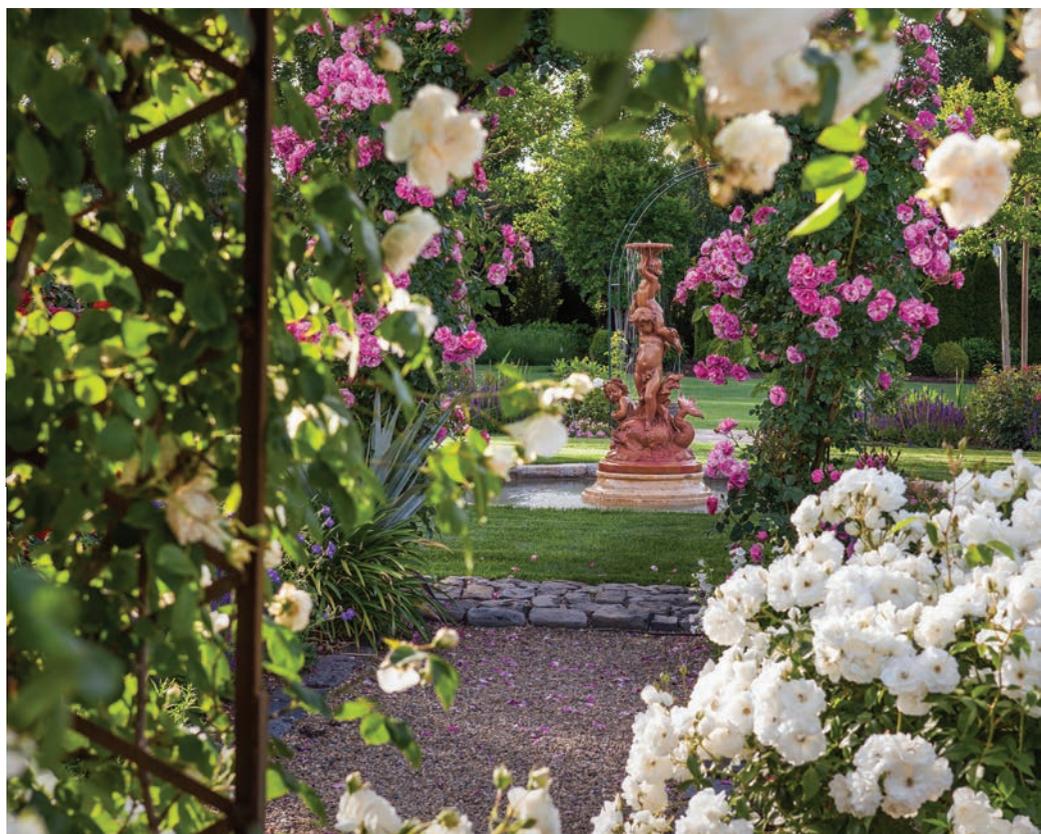


Gardens are often complex combinations of plants, borders, and garden rooms – be conscious of what's going on. Pay close attention, move slowly looking for photos, watching for various elements of the garden change in relation to each other as you move. Photos will click into place.



In this grand garden, the statue in the fountain is the focus, but it is the roses that make the photograph, framing the view.

When looking for a photograph of the rose try to appreciate how it's being used in the garden. Allow the eye to move through the photograph and the garden.





While we rose lovers may look at the roses first, they are only part of the garden. In this country garden, at the height of summer, we see roses and other perennials bursting out of the garden. The big red rose is the climber, 'American Beauty', and understanding that it is a climber helps to appreciate it sprawling over the fence.

In making this next, tighter photograph I was sure to include a bit of the fence to show that it was in the garden — this is not just a close-up picture of a rose.

Composition and Balance

The first thing I always tell my photography students is to fill the frame. Think of the four edges of your camera viewfinder as a canvas that you can fill up as would a painter. Use all the space — work with intention.

Don't just grab the first shot you see, think about how you want to fill the entire view-finder, and remember the background is part of the composition and has its own space.



I love this 'Eden' rose. ↗



Studying the scene, I want to simplify and get rid of some of the distracting background. I moved to my left a little bit and shot back toward the other, out of focus rosebush, and now the 'Eden' flowers really stand out. ↖



↖ Here, in the next example, I like the way this yellow 'Flutterbye' rose is tucked into the shrubs in this garden.

To capture an image to ensure my viewer really appreciates the rose, I need to come in tight and fill the frame. I do this with a zoom lens rather than moving closer. The tele-photo lens creates a precise focal point with background blurred that keeps the eye to the flower. ↘



One of the biggest mistakes many photographers make is not coming in close enough to the subject. Fill the frame with just the part that contributes to your story. The subject of this next photo is the rose arch covered with the hybrid climbing rose 'Berries 'n Cream' at the entrance to a country garden.

Come in tight on the arch, don't waste extra space. Note how I've put the arch off center in the left third of the frame to create a more interesting composition, allowing the path beyond to create some movement into the garden.



I have used the rule of thirds, a composition tool that helps create interest and balance. The center of the arch is precisely in the left third.

Composition can be a jigsaw puzzle, as you try to juggle the various elements and shapes together to make something pleasing and balanced. Visualize the underlying shapes you are creating, thinking about how all those shapes and blocks of color are organized within the frame — the four edges of the camera viewfinder that contain the shapes.



Working with Light

Good light is the elixir that can make a photograph sing. Photographers are always in search of good light. When photographing gardens stay away from any hot, sunny, con-tryasty light, which will make colors harsh and metallic, and black impenetrable shadows.



Roses often come in soft delicate colors, such as this 'Tuscan Sun', which looks fantastic in the garden with the other roses, the clear blues, and multiple greens of the garden — tones that can only be photographed in soft light, here, with high clouds on an overcast day.

You may have to add some extra punch and contrast later when you finish working with the photos, but shooting on overcast days is much preferred to shooting in hot sun.



My favorite time to photograph a garden is early morning. Late in the day is also a great time for good light but I really like the morning because the air is often clearer and the roses are more perky. I photographed this English rose 'Christopher Marlowe' in soft light just after dawn and was able to capture the sunburst through the distant trees.



When you have to shoot in bright sun, you can use a scrim to soften the light, which I talk about later in the book. But without a scrim, don't bother trying to photograph for anything other than your own memories. You won't want to show the photo. Wait for some shade if you can.

The color of the light changes in the shade, see how much nicer this rose looks in the shade as opposed to the hot contrasty sun.

Look for Your Own Story

Explore the garden with your own eyes looking for your own insight. Try to find some interesting, new angle; some provocation or intrigue, something interesting, whimsical, distinctive or unexpected in the garden. Investigate the details, look for the unusual, challenge yourself to see things new.



This 'Handel' rose, photographed with the sun right behind it creating a provocative looking picture — fun to look at. Don't be afraid to experiment with your camera, break the "rules" in trying to capture your feelings, your own interpretation.

Let your pictures tell a story. A good picture is not simply one that is technically correct or easy to look at, it should invite the viewer to learn something about the garden as you see it.

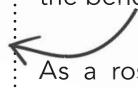
Be conscious of taking a picture and think about what you are saying.



The focus of this photograph is clearly the statue, but unmistakably we're in a rose garden, the story is much more than just the roses.



The story here, of the rose 'Constance Spry' is about the bench not just the rose.



As a rose photographer, trust your instincts about beauty and carefully compose an image of the rose as an essence of the garden as you see it.

Have fun, envelope yourself in the garden, look carefully at what you are seeing. Take time to smell the roses and use your camera to explore beauty.