11 Tips to Capturing the Perfect Digital Photo—It's Easier Than You Think
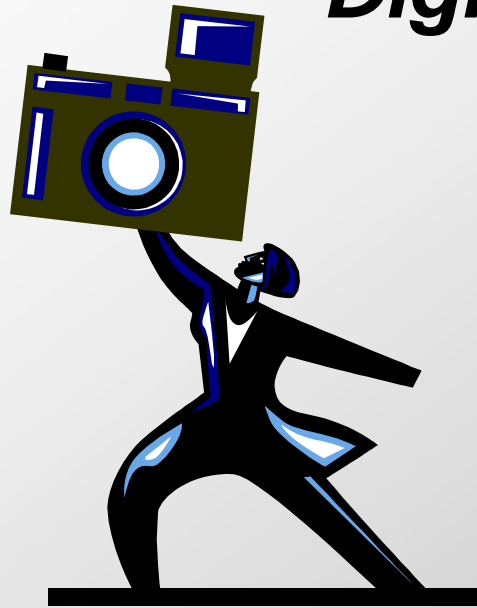
Matthew Yrigoyen, professional photographer and owner of Edenstone, a landscape design/build company in Santa Cruz, Calif., has been a photographer since 1964, and he really knows his stuff when it comes to taking the best pictures possible.

Here are eleven tips to help you do just that. *Continue >*

"Most people imagine that digital cameras are magical devices," Yrigoyen says. "But to make good digital photographs takes just as much time as with film…People think digital cameras do it all, they just have to point and shoot—not so. The beautiful images you see in magazines, taken by the best professional photographers, with the best and most expensive equipment, are not used fresh out of the camera. They are all 'processed' in Photoshop before they go to press or get included on a website. All good photographers have what is known as a 'workflow', which they follow meticulously, from the point of shooting and image capture, Photoshop processing, and final use. The trade secrets of the professional workflow are not really rocket science."

"The camera only does one little part," Yrigoyen adds. A good analogy to the field of concrete craft would be something like this: Using an image straight out of the camera is equivalent to pouring concrete in a flatwork form, screeding it and walking away. At that point, the work is hardly finished. It's the same with digital photography. Clicking the shutter is not the first or the last step of many that are necessary to produce a bright, crisp, captivating image.

Since more and more contractors are putting their portfolios on their websites, the need for quality photos is tenfold. Remember, *a picture's worth a thousand words*.

Photo Courtesy of
SuperStone, Inc.

Here are Yrigoyen's 11 workflow tips for taking the best digital photos possible:

1. **Read the camera manual.**
    The camera manual is your friend, so read the directions. This is one time that stopping and asking for directions is not only prudent, but also necessary. Take a little time, and familiarize yourself with the camera's "Menu Settings". In most of these little boxes, there are tons of hidden settings and adjustments that are not very difficult to use once you get to know them. You will be rewarded by the extra effort with much better photographs.

2. **Clean the lens.**
    Yrigoyen says a digital camera's lens is much less forgiving than a film camera, so be sure you're starting with a clean slate.

3. **Set the white balance.**
    Set the white balance on your camera for the lighting conditions you will be photographing in. This is normally set to daylight, but the daylight setting also typically has three sub-sets. Standard is for normal sunshine, warm is used the two hours before sunset and two hours after sunrise, and cool is best for a bright overcast sky. There is often an "Automatic" setting, which will work in a pinch, but custom settings are always superior. Some cameras have many adjustments for all kinds of lighting situations, so take a moment and pick the setting that best matches the available light. When indoors, adjust the white balance to the incandescent mode if your work is illuminated by regular light bulbs.

If you are under fluorescent lighting (the worst possible lighting for photography) set the camera for fluorescent, if it has such a setting. If all else fails, set it on automatic, and hope for the best.

4. **Set a high capture format.**
   Crank your camera to its highest capture format setting. You need to capture images in the highest format your camera is capable of. "Jpegs are out—garbage in garbage out," says Yrigoyen. The highest setting is "Raw", but "Tiff" will also work well. If you can't use Raw or Tiff , use the highest Jpeg setting you can. You won't be able to store as much on your memory card, and there's a longer processing time between shots, but it's the price you pay for the most professional looking photographs your camera can produce.
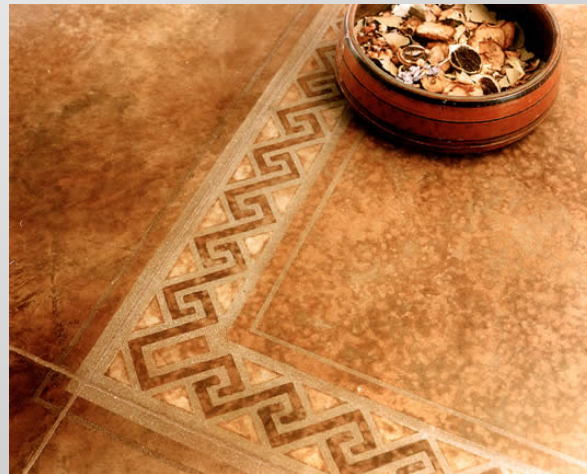

Photo Courtesy of Brickform Rafco Products

5.   **Set a low ASA (ISO) camera speed.**
Set your camera at its lowest speed (ASA or ISO setting). When shooting in daylight, set it to 100 ASA (or ISO) or less—80 to 100 is optimal, 200 max. As a rule of thumb, the lower the ASA, the higher the resolution; the higher the ASA, the lower the resolution. Yrigoyen says images captured at an ASA over 200, especially on inexpensive consumer cameras, will often tend to have a grainy look to them when they are enlarged.

6.   **Check your lighting conditions.**
All light is not created equal, so pay attention to reflective surfaces, especially when outdoors. Make sure the light doesn't bounce back into your camera. "You want to be able to see the most detail in the surface you're photographing," Yrigoyen explains. "Sometimes the light will be bad—too contrasty, or too flat, and you'll need to come back later, but you have to wait unless you want muddy, over-exposed, lackluster images. The best times for outdoor photography are the first two hours after sunrise, and the last hour or two before sunset. In professional parlance, these are known as the 'sweet hours', because the light is still intense, the overall contrast is lowered, the character of the light is rich, dramatic, and very forgiving." Avoid shooting in the middle of the day in open sunlight, when at all possible. When you must shoot in bright sunlight, *always* turn on your camera's flash unit, which will fill in the deep shadows and open up the detail in the darkest areas. (Check your manual for "Fill Flash" settings and instructions.)

Image adjusted in Photoshop

Image not adjusted in Photoshop

7. **Prepare the site.**
Be sure to clean all surfaces to be photographed, and remove, if possible, any extraneous objects or debris in the background. Use water by misting all masonry surfaces and surrounding plants. "Normally, wet surfaces photograph better than dry," says Yrigoyen. Water can also deepen colors, make surface details stand out, and give the scene a bright, clean and fresh look."

8. **Angles are important.**
Check if there's a better angle. "Cameras don't correct what the eye already has trouble seeing," observes Yrigoyen. "If you can't see the surface well, the camera will only make it worse, not better."

9. **Take multiple exposures.**
Take lots of pictures. Take several images and close-ups (especially if you have a macro lens, which allows you to get within inches of the subject). Take shots of close-up details, as well as more than one view of the product. "Make the photos appeal to the senses," Yrigoyen suggests. If your camera has a "Bracketing" setting, use it, especially in situations where the lighting is problematic. This will give you a range of exposures of each subject, and will allow you to pick the very best one for processing in Photoshop.

10. **Download the photos to your computer.**
Unless your images were taken as Jpegs, import them as Raw, if possible, or as Tiffs. Remember, once something is a Jpeg, it's compressed forever— and much of the quality of the image is reduced. So turning a Tiff into a Jpeg makes it a permanent Jpeg, valuable image data is lost, and converting the Jpeg back into a Tiff will **not** restore the data or the lost quality. All images should be saved on the computer at a resolution of 300 dots per inch (DPI) after downloading from the camera.

11. **Send pictures in high format.**
Send the images in the highest format possible (Tiff, at 300DPI is normal for all professional applications). If you have dialup Internet access, burning images on CD or DVD and sending them through the mail is your best bet. Without DSL on both ends, sending large files can be very cumbersome and time consuming.

Just remember, you want to display good pictures so people can appreciate your work, especially if they can't see it in person.

"You want a mirror image of your finished work," Yrigoyen concludes. "If you want more business, pay attention to your photos. Give it time, and be patient."

The processing of Raw or Tiff images in Photoshop, an essential part of the digital photographic process, or workflow, will be taken up in future articles.

Says Yrigoyen, "For those who want to expand their photographic horizons, there are two books that are highly readable for the amateur and the professional alike, and I give them my highest recommendation. Both are available from Amazon at a discount, and are worth their weight in gold. *The Advanced Digital Photographer's Workbook*, by Yvonne J. Butler, ED., and *The Photoshop Book for Digital Photographers*, by Scott Kelby. Read it and reap!"
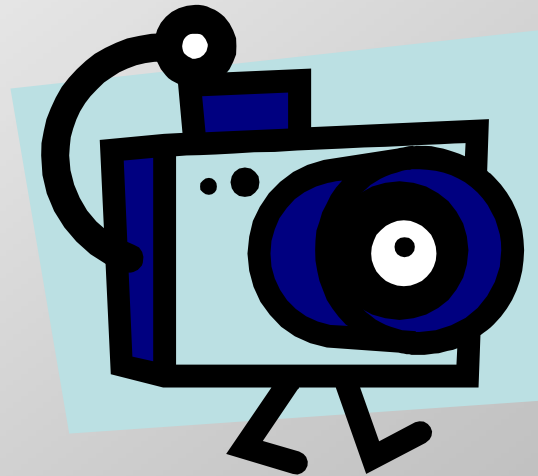
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Juliet Farmer is a Sacramento, California-based freelance writer. In addition to writing for The Concrete Network, Farmer is also a regular contributor to several publications, including Sacramento magazine, FanFare, Wholesale Source, Bridal Sources, Smart Meetings, Physical Therapy, Southern California Physician and NurseWeek. She's also a columnist for Inside Publications in Sacramento.

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NAVIGATION & USER TIPS

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KEYBOARD SHORT CUTS	PC	MAC
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Full screen/normal screen view	[Ctrl] [L]	[⌘] [L]

ABOUT THE CONCRETE SHERPA

The Concrete Sherpa is a team of people that represent the experience, teaching and learning of our team members and other industry leaders *on a mission to make life better for the concrete contractor*. We are an idea center striving to deliver thought provoking ideas based on "Concrete Advice for Business and Life" to stimulate you to reach new heights. As a user, you should remember to consider all information you receive, here at the Concrete Sherpa or elsewhere, not as a *cast in concrete* recommendation, but rather as an idea for you to consider and ponder.

Sherpa info

THE JOURNEY LEADING TO THE CONCRETE SHERPA PROJECT

The Concrete Sherpa Project (A Sherpa is a "guide") was born at The Concrete Network in mid 2004. Here is how it happened:

The biggest surprise, or gift, since starting The Concrete Network in 1999 has been the concrete contractor friends from around the country we've made and witnessing the passion they have for what they do. These people include Dave Pettigrew, up in the San Francisco Bay Area, or the Verlennich brothers in Minnesota, or Bob Harris in Georgia, the list goes on and on. It's quite inspiring.

We were once asked, "How are you so excited every day about concrete?" Well the answer is simple, it is impossible to not be excited about concrete when you have the job we do- interacting with hundreds of concrete contractors from every state in the country.

The thing we've learned about concrete contractors is that most are passionate *craftsmen*- they are often less passionate and experienced in the "office stuff". Human nature channels us to do what we are most comfortable with; learning how to use a new saw-cutting tool is comfortable; learning and implementing a new estimating strategy, or job management tool, is not so comfortable.

Sherpa info

THE JOURNEY CONTINUES…

So Sherpa was born to provide FREE and easy to use information on topics many contractors are not too comfortable with.

- Concrete Sherpa is here to provide help to contractors who are often 'Lone Rangers' and don't have anyone to get solid business advice from.

- Concrete Sherpa is here to provide help for contractors who have to work too hard and too many hours in their business, and one day realize they need to work *on their business, not in their business.*

- Have fun with Concrete Sherpa and go faster towards reaching success than you might have on your own.

- To skeptics who think something free can't be valuable, or there must be a trick- visit Concrete Sherpa and decide for yourself.

We hope you make great use of the Concrete Sherpa and it helps you to become an awesome success for yourself, your family, your church, and your community.

VISIT THE CONCRETE SHERPA

To visit the Concrete Sherpa click here http://www.ConcreteSherpa.com.