

Submitting Entries to the Photographic Competition

In 2006 I was asked to judge the Photographic Competition for the Hardy Orchid Society, and afterwards was asked to produce an article for the journal about the competition, and the selection and preparation of entries for show. More recently, I have been invited back again to judge in 2015 and 2016; this article is an updated version of the previous one, reflecting changes in the class definitions and rules, and ten more years' experience taking and judging photographs. My greatest concern in the last two competitions has been the number of excellent images which have been ruled out because they do not meet the requirements of the class.

What is the subject of the photograph ?

First of all, I should like to point out that this is a photographic competition. The rarity of a plant, and the quality and condition of the plant, do not have any influence on the result, though it is hard to take a good picture of a poor plant.

The next observation I would like to make is that all the classes in the Hardy Orchid Society competition state a specific subject:

- a landscape or habitat showing orchids in their natural environment
- a group of at least 3 orchid plants
- a single orchid plant
- a close-up of an orchid, showing one or more entire inflorescence(s)
- a close-up of an orchid showing part of an inflorescence
- a hardy orchid subject that has been manipulated creatively.

It is important that the main subject of your photograph matches the subject required for the class you put it in; if it doesn't, the photograph will not do as well as it should. Pay attention to any rules specific to the class, in particular the requirement that a group of or single orchid plant image should show the whole plant(s); in a class with a large number of entries, images which do not conform to the requirements of the class, or even those which are borderline, are likely to be ignored.

I think what happens is that some people start from an image they want to submit, and then look for a class to put it in, even if it isn't a good fit. That is a mistake. For example, if you have an image with two orchid plants in, there isn't a suitable class for it, unless it shows the landscape or habitat in which they are growing.

Landscape or habitat showing orchids in their natural environment

It is clear that there have been difficulties with the definition of this class, which used to be described as 'an orchidaceous landscape'. The key criterion here is that the photograph should illustrate the conditions or habitat under which specific orchids grow in the wild.

There is always a difficult judgement to make about what constitutes sufficient 'habitat', and some images flirt with danger in this respect. If only the orchids are in focus, and their surroundings are soft and blurred, then the image fails to do this. [Fig 1]



*Fig 1: A fascinating image of *Dactylorhiza viridis* growing in what appears to be a semi-shaded situation, but the depth-of-field is so shallow that it is hard to be sure of the habitat.*

Pictures showing an orchid spike superimposed on a landscape, with no other foreground, so that it is impossible to see how and where the plant is growing, fail likewise. In other cases the decision is more marginal; if there is any doubt, the image might be better in the class for a group of orchid plants. [Fig 2, 3]



*Fig 2 and 3. Two images of *Neottia nidus-avis* in its habitat. For me, the lower image gives a better impression of the habitat than the upper one, primarily because I can see the trees in the background.*

The image should not be dominated by large orchids in the foreground; nevertheless, orchids should be a significant element of the image. [Fig 4]



Fig 4: An evocative picture of a typical chalk downland orchid habitat, but for me here the orchids are not sufficiently significant in the image, just lending a pink haze to the grass.

There is no requirement to include wider landscape or strong landscape features in the image, but do remember that these can give an image structure and enhance the composition; if you are going to present only a section of meadow and the orchids within it, then considerable thought needs to be given as to how best to achieve a strong composition. The best entries in this class showed a habitat with orchids in the foreground, leading away to a wider landscape view in the background. [Fig 5]



*Fig 5: This image of *Dactylorhiza sambucina* in Northern Greece fulfils the requirement for the class perfectly.*

Ideally these landscape photographs should be taken with the camera on a tripod or other stable support (not hand-held) so that a small aperture and relatively long exposure can be used to maximize the depth of field. Although the subject is a landscape or habitat, sharpness of the foreground and middleground elements remains more important than that of distant landscape elements. If there are out of focus elements in the foreground of the image, these should not be distracting; under some circumstances they can make a useful contribution by providing a 'frame' to the image. [Fig 6]



*Fig 6: A fine image of *Gymnadenia conopsea*, providing sufficient habitat, but fatally weakened by the out-of-focus spike in the centre foreground.*

A Group of Orchids

I recognize that there is a considerable overlap between this class and the preceding one, and that some images may be equally at home in either class. The main difference from a judge's point of view is that in this class a group of orchids in the foreground of the image should be dominant, and form the main subject of the photograph. There is no need for extensive habitat around this group, or for a landscape in the background, though both may be present if they do not detract from the main subject. The whole of the group of orchids should be in focus; there is no scope in this class for blurred foreground elements. If the group of plants is not dominant in the image, it may be better entered into the landscape class.

Some images are ruled out in this class because they do not show the whole of the plants - it is important to see the leaves and surrounding soil or grass, as well as the whole of the flower-spikes. [Fig 7]



Fig 7: A lovely group of Serapias lingua, but we cannot see the whole of the plants, at least for the foreground spikes.

Difficulties also occur because of the requirement for three separate orchid plants, and it was necessary to seek advice from the stewards of the competition as to how many individual plants made up some of the groups; for example, clumps of *Cypripedium calceolus* appeared both in this class, and in the following class for a single orchid plant. In future competitions, to aid both exhibitors and judges, the focus will be on the number of spikes. Similar advice is, on occasion, needed as to whether a particular species of orchid is considered 'hardy'.

The best images in this class focused on a compact, coherent group of orchids, rather than showing orchids scattered all over the image [Fig 8, 9]



Fig 8 & 9: A thriving patch of Herminium monorchis, but they do not form a coherent group; compared for example to the clump of Dactylorhiza purpurella.

It is helpful if the orchids are separated somewhat from the background - in this class we don't need to see detail there. [Fig 10, 11]



Fig 10 & 11: The specimens of Dactylorhiza viridis are magnificent, but hard to distinguish from their background, whereas the Gymnadenia conopsea spikes are picked out by use of shallow depth-of-field.

However, the use of extremely shallow depth-of-field (and possibly focus-stacking) can be distracting and produce a rather unnatural effect. Fig 11 above just avoids doing that.

Single Orchid Plant

As noted above, the rules for 2016 specified that the main subject of the photograph should be the whole of a single, possibly multiple-stemmed, plant. Images of clumps with multiple flower-spikes were subject to review as to whether or not they consisted of a single plant, and several were rejected as not conforming to the requirements for the class. [Fig 12]



Fig 12: A great clump of Chamorchis alpina, but deemed not to be a single plant, and therefore an invalid entry in this class in 2016.

A change to the rules for the forthcoming competition, to focus on the number of spikes rather than the number of plants, should make the distinction between this and the previous class clearer for both the exhibitors and the judge.

Note also that the class requires the *whole* of the plant. It is particularly important to include the whole of the flower spike; if this is clipped by the top of the frame it weakens the picture dramatically. Cropped leaf tips are more excusable, but still provide the judge with an excuse to rule out the image when there are many to choose between.

In this class, the main subject should be in focus from front to back; by contrast, the background should be blurred and out of focus if possible, to prevent background elements detracting from the image [Fig 13]. If you can manage it, find a plant where the background is dark and shaded [Fig 14], to separate the subject further from the background. However, as in the previous class, the use of extremely shallow depth-of-field (and possibly focus-stacking) can be disturbing. [Fig 15]



Fig 14 & 15: The Dactylorhiza is separated well from its background using shallow depth of field, but the dark background gives the image of Epipactis leptochila an extra dimension.



Fig 16: Taking the blurring of the background and foreground to an extreme, however it is done, produces a very artistic impression but has a rather unnatural feel.

Close-up of an Orchid Plant

It is important to recognise that the class for a close-up of an orchid plant has now been split into two, with separate classes for close-ups showing the entire inflorescence (flower-spike), and for close-ups showing just part of the inflorescence. Several excellent close-up images were ruled-out from classes 4, 9, and 14 because they clearly did not show the whole of a flower-spike [Fig 17], and from classes 5, 10, and 15 because they appeared to show the whole of the flower-spike.



Fig 17: A fine image of Ophrys aymoninii, but the part flower at the bottom makes it inadmissible in the classes for close-ups showing the entire inflorescence (flower-spike).

In these classes the subject of the photograph should be flower spike or floret, or part thereof. Whilst it is tempting to use pictures which show insects visiting the flowers, and these can be complementary to the picture and enhance its appeal, in many cases the butterfly, bee or bug rests between the plant and the viewer, and dominates the image [Fig 18, 19] to the point where the plant is not the main subject.



Fig 18: A beautiful image of a Glanville Fritillary - but not a close-up of the orchid.

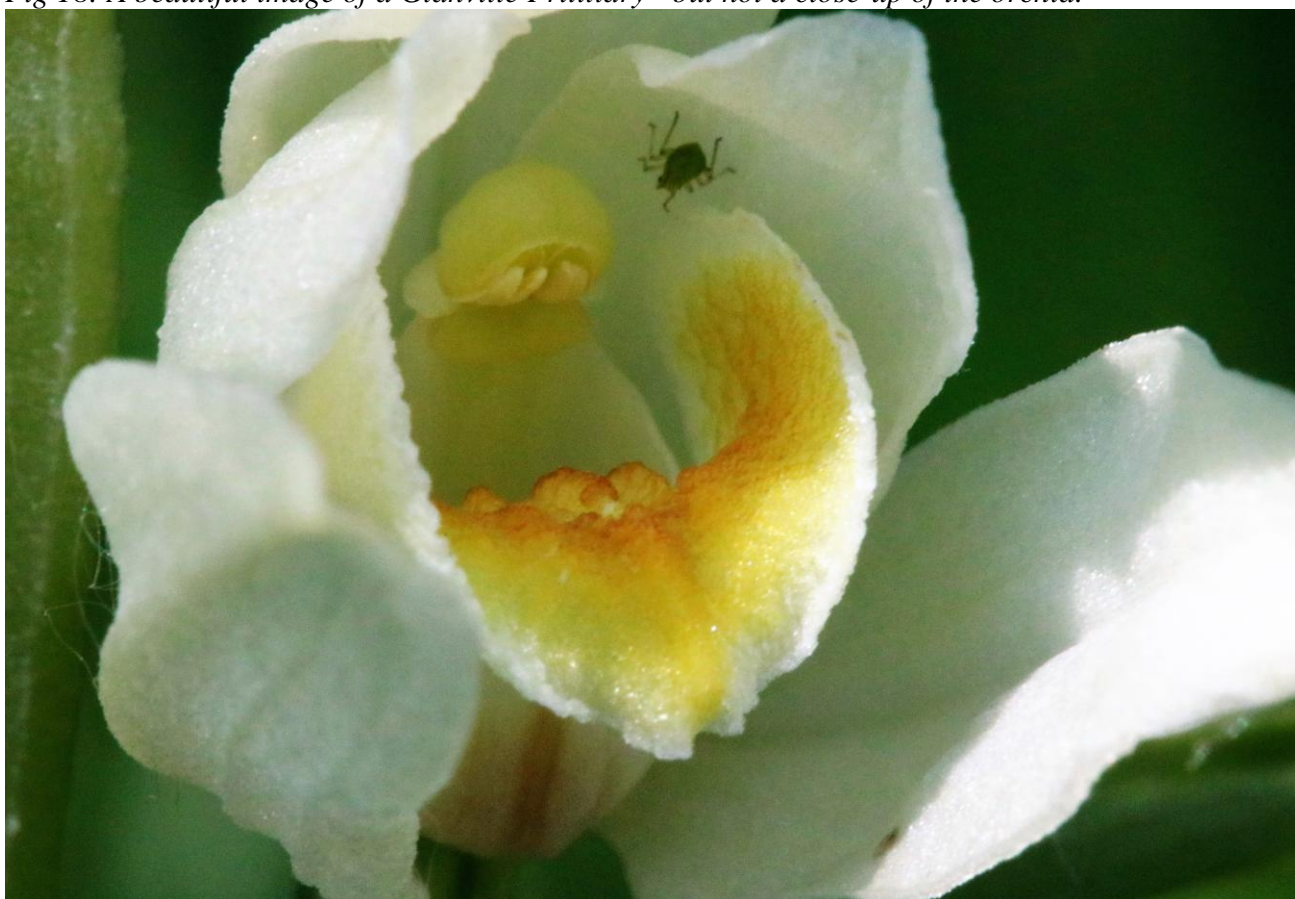


Fig 19: Although the insect is very small in frame, it still holds the attention of the viewer.

Again, control of focus is important. Foreground and central parts of the flower should be in focus; slight loss of focus towards the back of the flower is acceptable, but may weaken the image in competition. The background, including other parts of the plant which are not the main subject, should be out of focus [Fig 20, 21], and if possible dark, so that it does not distract the viewer from the subject. [Fig 22]. Focus-stacking techniques work well in close-up images, without introducing the unnatural feel referred to above.



Fig 20: A good picture of the Serapias, but the background is distracting



Fig 21: The background here is beautifully soft, helped by a relatively wide aperture (f8) for a close-up image.



Fig 22: Use of the sky as a background provides a very stark, high-contrast image in which detail of the inflorescence is hard to make out.

Creative Manipulation of a hardy orchid subject

This is a relatively new class in the competition. Many things are possible using Photoshop and similar photo-editing packages. When I was judging this class I was looking for two main things:

- treatments which enhanced the appeal or interest of the image
- treatments which showed some creativity and imagination, and which went beyond simple use of standard filters and treatments built into Photoshop or other packages.

On the other hand, this class is not looking for basic manipulation which enhances the quality of the image invisibly e.g. by removing distracting items from the background (see the section below on Making the Best of Your Images).

Composition

The composition of your photograph needs to focus the attention of the viewer on the main subject. It needs to provide a good view of the main subject from its best aspect, rather than being taken from an awkward angle or obscured by other foreground foliage.

Landscape photographs need balance, and leading lines to help guide the attention of the viewer; foreground orchids should be off-centre, not too large in the frame, and balanced by landscape elements. Most importantly, the subject needs to be contained; a group of orchids which runs out of the picture leads the viewer's attention out of the picture. [Fig 23]



Fig 23: Here the eye can follow the Lady Orchids out of frame on both sides of the image.

For a single plant, a close up, and often for a group of plants, a simple central positioning of the subject works fine. The spacing left around the subject is important – too little and the subject will appear cramped and squeezed by the edge of the picture – too much and the judge will complain about empty uninteresting space, or distracting background elements. This 'breathing space' is particularly important for single plant and close up images. [Fig 24, 25]



Fig 24 & 25: Two promising images, but both cropped too tight to the main subject.

Beware bright or colourful stray elements in the corners of the image, or in the background behind the main subject; they will distract the viewer's eye [Fig 26]. Even a second flower, intruding into the corner of the frame, can ruin a close-up. Before taking the picture, check carefully around the viewfinder (and just outside it – most cameras capture more than you can see through the viewfinder). Having identified a problem element, you need either to remove it, or if that is not possible (the problem is a rare plant or an immovable object in the background), you should attempt to change your position, angle or possibly the depth of field, until the offending item is no longer a distraction.



Fig 26: A well-composed landscape giving good habitat information, with an orchid placed nicely in the foreground, but the eye is caught by the red car in the background.

If you don't notice the problem until you've taken the picture (and it is amazing how unobtrusive a bright sweet wrapper can be when you are focusing on a rare plant), you need to disguise it or remove it altogether. If the stray element is near one side or corner of the image, you can mask or crop the image. Failing that, you need to retouch the image to remove the distraction, which is much easier if you are working digitally.

Lighting

Lighting is one of the hardest things to manage when you are out in the field. Invariably, the plant you want to photograph, the very best specimen, is growing in the worst situation for photography, deep shade, or bright sunlight, or possibly worst of all, with bands of shadow and sunlight lying across it.



Fig 27: Bright sunlight can provide very difficult conditions for photography, with high contrast, bright highlights and harsh shadows. The photographer has done remarkably well here under the circumstances.

Bright sunlight is a problem because it causes hard contrast with harsh shadows, where light areas of the subjects are burnt out, and shadow areas contain little detail [Fig 27]. Hazy sunshine or bright overcast conditions are ideal; failing that, morning or evening light is softer than the middle of the day. When taking single plant photographs, or close ups, a convenient shadow can work wonders, cast either by a companion or by holding up a sunshade or something similar [Fig 28]. The position of the shadow and the framing of the image need to be controlled to avoid brightly lit elements in the background of the photograph, which tend to draw the eye. No reduction in depth of field will disguise these.



Fig 28: Although the subject is in open grassland, overcast conditions (or a strategic shadow) prevent issues with bright sunlight and harsh contrast.

Alternatively, sometimes a reflector can be hugely effective, bouncing light back on the subject from a different direction and alleviating the shadows.

However, when photographing a wider view, no simple shadow will suffice, save a fortuitous cloud. Under these conditions, it is probably best to set the camera to underexpose by up to a stop, hoping to retain detail in the highlights, and to recover the shadow areas with digital manipulation.

The same tricks with shadows or a reflector can sometimes be used to overcome the effects of bands of shadow and sunlight. Again, the last resort is to try to retain detail in the highlights, and to recover the shadow detail on the computer later.



Fig 29: This image has been taken in deep shade, probably using an automatic exposure, which has resulted in the scene looking much too bright and unnatural. In these conditions you need to get the camera to under-expose by a stop or so to achieve a rendition which is a little darker, and then to adjust it carefully to retain the natural feel.

In heavy shade, the opposite problem is encountered. In order to obtain a photograph with reasonable colour and impact, more light needs to be cast on the subject. If possible, this should be done with a reflector, which gives a gentle effect and doesn't cause harsh shadows, or failing that, with fill-flash [Fig 30].



Fig 30: I believe a little artificial lighting has been used here, very successfully, to produce an excellent image with good colour rendition and modelling.

In the darkest areas, larger amounts of flash are more or less unavoidable; I usually use a diffuser to try to soften the hard shadows which can result. At least the background is less of a problem, and can normally be left dark. [Fig 31] Beware of turning the ISO up too far. Unless the images are sympathetically processed, even ISO 400 can result in unacceptable levels of noise in your images, at least with the Canon digital SLR cameras I am familiar with.



Fig 31: The use of flash in heavy shade can produce severe problems with bright highlights and harsh shadows, unless the lighting is softened.

Making the Best of your Images

In the 2015 and 2016 competitions, there was a significant degree of variation in levels of digital processing; some images appeared to be straight off camera, while others had been edited. Rule 13 allows **minor** adjustments to improve quality and **limited** manipulation to remove distracting items in all images in all classes. This is intended to include also techniques such as High Dynamic Range (HDR) and focus-stacking where multiple individual images are combined to produce a single result, without altering the essential truth of the image, but enhancing the range of contrast (HDR), or depth-of-field (focus-stacking). Done well, digital image processing can enhance significantly the quality of the image, and remove some of the weaknesses judges are likely to identify. Done badly, it can ruin a perfectly acceptable image. This is, if anything, more true of HDR and focus-stacking than simpler adjustments [Fig 32, 33].



Fig 32: The background has been selected and blurred in a rather obvious way. This needs to be done with a lot more care and subtlety for the effect to work.



Fig 33: At first sight this is an excellent image, but close inspection of the lower half of the image reveals some rather disturbing artefacts and incongruities which suggest extensive editing.

Subtlety and retaining a natural feel to the image are key. I don't have time or space here to give a detailed account of such processing, but I would like to offer a few pointers towards improving the quality of your images, whether you are planning to present them as jpegs or prints.

- a) **resolution** – if you have a low resolution image (2-3 megapixels), (or, dare I say it, if your image is not terrifically sharp), I suggest that you enter it as a 5x7in print and not as an A4, where print defects will be exaggerated. Look at the size of your image in pixels and aim for at least 300 pixels per inch on the print. With care about the quality of the image, you can drop to c.200 pixels per inch, but below that, quality starts to suffer badly.
- b) **cropping** – every photo-editing tool I have encountered includes a mechanism for cropping an image (and usually for rotating it to correct verticals and horizons). These tools allow you

to adjust and improve the composition of your picture, and to remove those annoying background elements that you didn't see at the time.

- c) **adjusting lighting levels and contrast** – it is often necessary to boost the contrast of an image for impact, though you should try to keep some detail in the darkest and lightest areas of the image. The Levels or Curves tool, or their equivalent, are usually the best way of adjusting the lighting of an image. Be subtle rather than heavy handed. Often these tools are best used on a selected area of the image to adjust the lighting of particular parts of the picture e.g. to tone down bright patches in the background, or to brighten areas of shadow. Feather your selection by at least 50 pixels to avoid creating a hard line around the area you have adjusted. Beware of brightening dark areas too much; you want to bring out some detail without making noise too obvious, and the resulting area of the image should still look dark.
- d) **saturation** – a slight increase in saturation can be necessary to add punch to an image, but it is best done subtly; oversaturated colours can look very wrong. Usually greens are a good measure of accurate colour – check that the grass still looks like grass etc. If you end up with blocked areas of flat colour with no detail you have overdone the contrast or the saturation.
- e) **cloning** – many new users of photo-editing tools are delighted to discover the clone tool, which can be used to 'paint over' faults in the image. However, unless well done, cloning can be obvious and leave distracting marks. My advice is to keep your use of the clone tool to a minimum; often other manipulations e.g. adjusting the brightness or contrast of a selected area will obscure the fault equally well in a more subtle way.
- f) **focus and sharpening** – if you don't sharpen a digital print it will look out of focus – typically, for printing, the image needs to be sharpened slightly more than looks right on the screen. Again subtlety is the key - an over-sharpened image is bound to be marked down by the judge. **Note** that if the image produced by the camera is a jpeg, it will have already been sharpened in-camera. In 5x7in prints in particular, the main subject must look pin-sharp. You may need to use different sharpening parameters to get the same image to look sharp at different print sizes. It is often a good idea to select and sharpen only those parts of the image which should be sharp; sharpening dark out-of-focus areas will only exaggerate noise [Fig 34, 35, 36].



Fig 34, 35 & 36: Many images in the competition were oversharpened slightly. Both of these look fine at this size, and probably when printed, but take a closer look and the tell-tale outlines appear.



- g) **colour rendition** – the colour of the prints you produce is affected by your monitor and printer setup and profiling. The most common cause of problems is the paper and ink you are using; most photo printers produce reasonable quality images if you use the manufacturer's own paper and ink. Cheaper, third-party materials, particularly ink, can cause poor colour rendition. If you are using manufacturer's ink and still having difficulty you may need to learn more about colour management and monitor profiling – there are lots of good websites which offer advice. Also, see what a good photo lab can do with your image – I still get professional prints made regularly, particularly of images where I am struggling to get accurate colours.

Presentation of Entries

Prints must be presented in plastic sleeves, but please use plain sleeves, not textured ones which obscure the detail of the print. Even clear plastic sleeves make prints dimmer and flatter, and in several cases I have found it necessary to remove the print from the sleeve before I can make a decision about it.

Labelling is important – prints should be labelled with the name of the plant (and possibly its general location if photographed in the wild), and the class in which the photograph has been entered. The photographer's name should be recorded on the entry card which is turned over so it is not visible to the judge. Unlabelled or mislabelled images can cost judges and stewards a lot of time and at some shows can be rejected as 'not according to schedule'.

When submitting images for the digital image (jpeg) classes, it is important to supply them at their original, or at least a high resolution, and not resized to a low resolution for easy emailing. Image quality is an important consideration when judging, and it is very difficult to form a positive view of the quality of an image only 1000 pixels across when comparing it with one 5000 pixels across. Naming requirements for digital images are found in rule 14.

And Finally...

Finally, as in 2006, I would like to thank the stewards for their kindness and hard work, guiding me through the process of judging this large array of images, and to congratulate again all the exhibitors for producing such a magnificent display, in particular the prize winners in each class for producing such fine photographs.

This article would not have the same interest and value without the use of images from the competition to illustrate the points made, and I would like to thank the many selfless photographers who agreed to allow the use of their images for this purpose.