



Barry Guthertz



Sunflowers

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Equipment: Nikon D200, 60mm micro-Nikkor lens, Sigma 18-50mm lens, Nikon D600 Speedlight, and a lightweight aluminum stepstool

Sunflowers

My fascination with sunflowers began in the '80s when I was working on a project creating photographic mandalas. In researching the “Golden Mean” to position the images, I came to appreciate its application in nature, and the perfect geometric growth patterns of flowers. The spiral pattern of sunflower seeds on their large “heads” 8-12 inches (20-30cm) across caught my attention.

Trying to photograph sunflowers when visiting a garden can be problematic because of timing issues: I would often arrive, only to be disappointed to find withered, dying, and chewed-on sunflowers. Varieties grow anywhere from 3 to 16 feet (1 to 3.5 meters), so it can also be a challenge to simply get close enough to get the shot you want.

While photographing some flowering clematis that my wife had planted, it suddenly dawned on me that growing my own sunflowers would give me the best chance to get some terrific shots. By raising my own I would catch them at their peak. So, in 2008, I pushed some Burpee sunflower seeds into my small tomato garden, and the project took root. Being able to watch their growth on a weekly, then daily basis was exhilarating. I discovered a beauty in the complete life cycle of a sunflower that I had never before really experienced. The first of my sunflowers were part of my *Floraphilia* portfolio [*LensWork* #89]; those images fueled my passion to continue growing more and different varieties.

You would think it's easy to grow sunflowers: just stick a couple of sunflower seeds in the ground, add water, and in a couple of weeks you've got a gorgeous sunflower. Unfortunately, it doesn't work that way. First, there are the cutworms that nip off the young seedlings. Then there are the chipmunks that chew off the tops as soon as they begin to smell like seeds. Once leaves emerge, deer and groundhogs are quick to enjoy a sunflower salad. If the stalk survives these “predators,” gains height, and develops a mature, seeded head, I must then deal with the squirrels and birds that see my prized subject as *food!*

Whether I'm shooting in my backyard garden, at a neighbor's house, a flower farm or public garden, I like to travel light so I can pick-up and go. I use a backpack to stow my Nikon D200, 60mm micro-Nikkor lens, Sigma 18-50mm lens, Nikon D600 Speedlight, and a lightweight aluminum stepstool.

Just as it took years to develop a good workflow using film (with all of the variables of film, chemistry, and paper) to achieve the look I wanted — it's been the same for my digital workflow. There are no shortcuts. After a 10-year digital journey, I can finally say that I'm thrilled with the results — and looking forward to the next wave of possibilities as better hardware and software become available. Meanwhile, I can't wait for Spring — to plant, and bring to life, some new and different photographic subjects.

BARRY GUTHERTZ

Born 1946, Brooklyn, New York
Currently lives in Norwalk, Connecticut



Why photography?

As a child, our family went to the Catskill Mountains during the summer months, so from an early age I developed an appreciation for nature and the outdoors. In the '60s and '70s I lived in Park Slope in Brooklyn, New York, and spent countless hours in Prospect Park and the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens — where I deepened my connection to the life cycle of plants. I was trying to figure out “what's next” in my life, so I borrowed an old 35mm Pentax from my father and started taking pictures. Looking through the viewfinder and framing image after image gave me a focus I sorely needed and helped ground me to a world that I wanted to run away from.

Formal / informal photographic education?

I'm more or less self-taught, although I did take a class in Darkroom 101 with Ben Attas at the New School in NYC. He was in charge of the darkrooms for Modern Age Photography — a large commercial printing house in the city. He was one tough teacher to please. I went home night after night shaking my head wondering if I would ever make a “good” print. It was that toughness, however, that made me very critical, and a perfectionistic about my printing. I'll never forget when my first print brought a smile to his face — I knew that I had finally gotten what he was trying to convey.

What is the role of photography in your life?

My photography over the years has focused primarily on natural subjects. By slowing down and carefully observing the world around me, I am able to discover the sacred in everyday life. . . and within myself as well.

Sources of artistic influence?

Edward Weston, Bret Weston, Ansel Adams, Paul Caponigro, Minor White all influenced my early work, as did Georgia O'Keefe and Monet. They each had a passion for their art as well as eros for the creative process that touches me very deeply.

How do you describe "home"?

My wife Mary happens to be an avid gardener, and I've become a fairly good gardener as well. Between the two of us we've surrounded our home with flower gardens, and even converted a swimming pool into a pond with waterlilies and lotus. Many of the images in this project, as well as in my *Floraphilia* portfolio, were taken in our gardens.

Where can we find your work?

I'm represented by June Bateman Fine Art, New York City www.junebateman.com

Website: www.barryguthertz.com