

Bokeh: When Blurriness is Next to Godliness

by John Stahl

In photographing daylilies, as well as other flowers, clean, crisp images are usually desirable. In fact, getting both the bloom and the background in focus is often thought to be the best representation for the viewer. It



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occurred to me that this may not always be true. Allow me to throw a monkey wrench (or a shovel or trowel) so to speak, into the mix. My premise is that the crisp representation of the bloom is the first priority, but that the background should enhance it, not take away from its importance. Now how does one actually create a background that will emphasize the flower? I can think of three ways....the use of *bokeh*, creating a black background and filling the frame with the flower's image.

All right now, let's relax. I'm not going to go all technical with you. Allow me first to define *bokeh*. It's the blur produced by out-of-focus parts of an image. This is the way the lens renders out-of-focus points of light. Most of you have probably seen photos in which the background is dark, out of focus, and may have fuzzy, spherical points of light



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scattered about. Photos #1, 2 and 3 are examples. This is the more or less "classic" form of *bokeh*, but to me any background containing blurred points qualifies.



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- #1 - *H. 'Rognvaldursson'* (Mahieu/Burris, 2007)
- #2 - A *Tithonia* blossom (Mexican Sunflower)
- #3 - *H. 'Dances With Giraffes'* (Reed, 2005)

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Photos #4 and 5 demonstrate amorphous forms in the background, rather than small, spherical shapes.

A totally black background just might be the most dramatic of choices. Check out Photos #6, 7 and 8. To me, both blurred and black backgrounds bring the photography of flowers to an art form.



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I'll confess that I don't always know when I'm photographing a flower that I'll necessarily get the desired effect. There is some luck or chance involved. To throw the background out of focus one uses a large lens opening, which by itself, has a very small depth of field. If I focus on the face of the bloom using a very wide lens opening, the range of sharpness going from the flower to the area behind it will be very small, hence an outof-focus zone. The position of the flower in the garden will also come in to play. Flowers that are somewhat short, and have a great

#4 - 'Ta-Dah' (Brooks, 2007)

#5 - 'Toodleeoo Kangaroo' (Reed, 2003)

#6 - 'Double Pompon' (Miles, 1972)

#7 - 'Katherine Harris' (Reinke, J. 1999)

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deal of other plant foliage behind them are not good candidates for *bokeh*. Tall and very tall plants are my favorites because quite often there is no foliage that is close, or if any, is a distance away. Because of their height, it allows you flexibility to move around for the best view. These tall blooms are often the best choice for developing completely black backgrounds. While focusing your eye will tell you at these times what kind of background might result.

The third technique to emphasize a bloom is filling the frame with the subject. This will reduce the area of the background. You can do this while photographing the subject, or cropping later on in the computer using photo editing software. Photos #9 and 10 are examples of cropping in the computer. In addition, these two images also have *bokeh*.



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#8 - Female Ruby-throated Hummingbird at Lobelia blooms

#9 - 'Brookside Summer Sonata' (Stahl 2014)

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Along with flowers, other subjects benefit from *bokeh* or black backgrounds. Examples would be birds and insects. See Photos #11, 12 and 13. In macro photography, when shooting insects, one already has a situation of limited depth of field. I find that if I can arrange to have the insect on an edge of a plant, it is quite easy to get a crisp image of the creature with a wonderfully blurred background.

I'll continue to delve into the world of blurred and black backgrounds. I know that not everyone will like or appreciate *these techniques*, but I present them to you from my viewpoint. You have to make your own decision.



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#10- Malachite Prism (Doorakian, 1999)

#11- Female Red-winged Blackbird

#12- Bumble Bee on Echinacea

#13- Monarch Butterfly on Joe Pye Weed

All photos in this article by John Stahl