

LOOKING FOR GREAT STOCK PHOTO SUBJECTS?

Look no further than your own backyard!

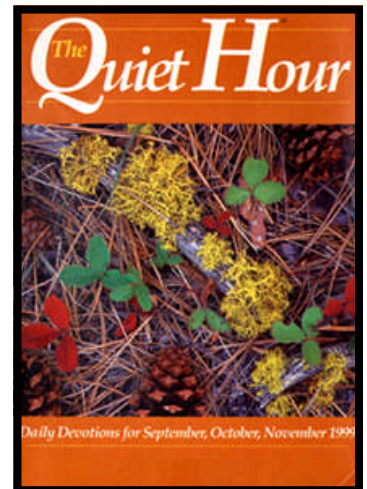
I admit and I'll confess; that the most memorable moments as an outdoor and landscape photographer have been from photo expeditions and adventures! Trips where I have spent time planning a visit to an incredibly beautiful location. Usually somewhere I have never been and a location I have dreamed of exploring with my camera. It is the adventure I live for! This is what it's about and why I do it. It is not for love of money or looking at my imagery on the lightbox, the monitor, or in a published medium. It's about the adventure of being 'out there' and the need to explore, search, and capture my vision of the natural world.



How fulfilled my life would be if this is how it worked, but it isn't, and it's not the reality either. In fact, I do love money, and seeing my images published is good for the ego. But, this also provides the financial necessities for more photo adventures to new locations. In 20 years of travel and shooting, I have covered the highlights of the lower 48 and it was time to look at other subjects. I began by looking in my own backyard and eventually realized that these stock subjects were very financially rewarding.

I had a conversation with one of my stock agent's years ago, Mark Karras of WestStock, (now Imagestate) about trends he was observing within the industry. He gladly looked at all my outdoor and travel images for representation, selected some, but was quite frank with me in regards to what, where, and how to shoot top selling subjects. He reiterated the point I mention above and that is; you don't need to go far and wide, just plan better for success in stock photography.

It is a common thought among photographers that the best photographs and salable images come from the other side of the world. The reality is that the most profitable images that sell time and again can be taken near your home base and even in your backyard. Yet I say to myself: "I need adventure and there is nothing like motorin' on down to the red rock of Utah or the fall color of New England!" Realistically, success in stock photography is making every photo shoot an adventure and if you are a working photographer, making some money from your efforts.



As I took the time to seriously explore my own backyard and nearby parks, my mind began to open up and I was able to see things that I probably had passed by many times. Eventually I realized there was a gold mine of available subjects and they were everywhere. There were the flowers and the insects that frequented them, the birds, and other critters. So I went about my task! Looking up, down, and all around there was plenty for the camera and I created images that would later sell, some well. Cloud formations, the leaves of fall, a natural still life on the forest floor, and a close-up of a butterfly on a sunflower were all future sellers. I continued to work the home front for a long time.

When I presented my collection to my agent, he selected a handful and inquired as to my next shoot. Fantasizing about summer wildflowers in Colorado, I answered "what about gardening" and it was music to his ears. That was, I convinced myself, 'man made nature', right?



I actually had no time to garden, and quite honestly, no interest. But my father was an avid gardener, so I paid him a visit. Everything was blooming and growing and some ready for harvest. Doing some pre-shoot research on gardening concepts, I came away with plenty of ideas. I proceeded to photograph tomatoes on the vine, corn on the stalk, lettuce, and strawberries in the patch. What had begun as a narrow minded idea for a stock photo shoot, turned into an adventure of its own and each and every one of these subjects spawned new ideas. Soon it was the ladybugs, the spiders, the slugs, and the butterflies and bees, but also garden pests captured by the camera.

As I continued shooting the ideas kept coming and I found more commercially viable shots such as the lawn photograph. Believe it or not, this has sold numerous times. I next decided to stage some 'gardening concepts' and include some human elements. I convinced my father to let me photograph his weathered hands holding tomatoes. It was a cloudy bright day and I used a white foam core card as a reflector underneath. We continued with other ideas I had; gloved hands digging in dirt, and a handful of fresh cut flowers, pruning, smelling flowers, a foot on a shovel about to be thrust into the ground, and him holding an armful of garden bounty.

I eventually left, but realized I was on a roll as new ideas kept coming to mind. Days later I gave my wife a list of needed props and she headed for the garden center to purchase items for another gardening shoot. My plan was to be highly conceptual with my ideas. One of the first setups we did was arranging the garden still life of the flowers, pots, gloves, and trowels and shot from above. We worked this situation to death by moving items around and leaving some bare pavement on the sides and top allowing for text. We photographed my wife's gloved hands digging in a pot, pouring water, and pruning. Another setup to simulate gardening was to pour a bag of potting soil onto a sheet of plastic and then simulated potting plants. Who can tell that it is not a flower bed? All these gardening photos have been published!



I occasionally return to garden photography when new ideas hit me and have found that my own backyard continues to offer unlimited opportunities. Many pho-

tographers do the same, photographing areas close to home. We have seen the images of Hummingbirds in flight, frozen by flash and probably taken in a backyard somewhere. Spiders and their webs, the visiting raccoon, blooming flowers all make potentially good stock photos if handled well.

A photographer/friend is an avid grower of orchids. She has a setup in her greenhouse for using natural light to photograph every variety of orchid and against a pleasing neutral ground. She makes money doing this! There is nothing wrong with creating your own 'manufactured', yet natural looking environments. A beautiful photograph of a Rose does not have to be a 'wild' rose. Many a nature photographer has created their own gardens to attract wildlife and these can provide some outstanding opportunities.



Good selling stock photos are images that convey the message and meet the needs of the client. This means that landscape and nature photographs do not need to be spectacular Sierra Club calendar images to be successful. Clients may look at a photo and say "wow" but won't buy it if it does not fit the communication needs. I received a call from a graphic designer regarding a project he was producing for a new residential/condominium development. This multi page brochure featured photographs of the homes and their kitchens, bedrooms, and living spaces. He mentioned he was also looking for images of nature to use in this brochure, ones that were representative of the area near this development. The concept behind this brochure was to illustrate not only the real estate, but the environment and quality of the neighborhood, a huge selling point to buyers these days.

The designer's plan was to use these photos as design elements within the brochure. The photos of the buildings would be large and these nature photos would be postage stamp size and placed in the corners or other places on the page as design elements. I asked what specifically and he just said "plants, water, sky," etc. I went over to the development and hiked down to the river where I proceeded to shoot details of water flow, grasses at the waters edge, pine cones on the forest floor, bark of a pine tree, and anything else that captured my eye. I delivered a cd with the edited versions of these natural elements and he purchased 10 of them at \$75.00 each. Not bad for 5 hours work.

There is not only an unlimited amount of photographic opportunities in your backyard, but also in your neighborhood. What you don't find naturally, create it yourself, as long as it is ethically correct. Good stock photography is not only about discovery but also about creation. If you have an idea, create it. Let the local designers, builders,

and any other potential clients know that you have these images on file and available for licensing.

This morning I set out with camera, tripod, and dog to hike down to the meadow behind our home. There had been a last ditch attempt by mother nature to force winter to last a few more days by depositing a light dusting of snow. On the edge of the meadow was the decaying stump of a once majestic Ponderosa Pine whose life was cut short by a few hundred years with the help of a chain saw, some 30 years ago. I liked to return to this spot to observe and photograph the intricate detail of twisted grain enhanced by frost and snow and any other discoveries that may be there. This small meadow is my backyard and has produced quite a few images for my files and it has been good to me. I continually 'work it' for new images and ideas and will be back soon, after my upcoming adventure to Moab's red rock.



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