



'Winter-flowering shrubs'

Christmas cards with a garden theme

John McCormack

Many of us take photographs and would like to use them to make personal greetings cards. Here are some ideas from John McCormack, an award-winning photographer who for many years has designed a Christmas card, usually with a botanical or garden theme. Starting with a few cards made at home, and encouraged by recipients who eagerly await 'this year's card', his seasonal project has now grown to nearly 250 cards run off by a local printer.

Here John has chosen five typical card styles, ranging from a simple, single-fold card to recent, more elaborate examples. He describes how he designed the layout and shows the final results.

For keen garden photographers, he also explains some of the technicalities involved in taking the photographs.

'Birds' feet' – a single fold, and one photograph covering the back and front when folded.



Although it might be thought that the first step in making a card is to take some photographs, it's far better to plan the design before reaching for the camera.

We are all familiar with 80 or 100 gsm paper used in our home computer printer, but we will want a much thicker card for our Christmas special. My local printer uses 350 gsm card for this, which is ideal. And I prefer the 'gloss art double sided' version. Although much modern commercial printing is carried out on roll paper, this is thinner and tends to curl slightly; printing on thicker, flat card is far superior for our purpose.

The commercial printer's high-quality printing machine can use various sizes of card, including a size just larger than

A3¹ (called SRA3) which allows for extra space for 'bleeding'² margins and final guillotining. As a customer I have found that it is worth keeping this in mind. The least expensive method of producing the cards is to jigsaw the design to fit into this overall format, maybe several times over, to minimise wasted space. Carefully making up the pictures and layout at the outset will reduce the cost. The ideal is to produce a scheme which is almost 'print ready'. The printer will also have a commercial folding machine which produces professional looking neat seams along the fold lines. With careful planning, the final cost of a run of a hundred or so cards will be substantially less than bought cards of equivalent quality.

So back to our photographs. First of all, it is now clear that our image may well need to be cropped or reshaped to fit into your scheme. Rule one is to not 'crop-in' too close with your initial photograph. Leave plenty of room around the flowers (or whatever your subject) so that final resizing and reshaping does not end up with lost tips of flower petals.

'Birds' feet'

(card 297 x 210mm [A4] card – image one side only)

One of my first cards, it was A4 size with a conventional single fold. The photograph of birds' footprints in the snow on the small terrace outside our cottage, taken in early morning, covers all one side of the card, both the front and back when the card is folded.



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'Hollies at Kew' – final side A with 4 photos; final side B with 2 photos, a list of plants & a blank space for a personal greeting. These images are the only ones in this article that are original prime quality photographs.

¹A3 card is 420 x 297 mm

²Printing with 'bleeding' edges means that the print is very slightly enlarged so that there is no white edge to the final printed picture. Two adjacent pictures are therefore effectively 'merged' together.

Snow pictures in colour can be difficult because there is often an excess of UV light – hence there is often a blue ‘cast’ to the photograph. An alternative is to make the picture ‘monochrome’ (black and white). Your camera instructions should explain this.

The best way to keep snow white is to ‘lock’ the white balance colour temperature to a fixed mid level (say K5000) and to also use a RAW³ file image capture so that any colour cast can be removed in software such as Lightroom or Photoshop.

‘Hollies at Kew’

(card 420 x 105 mm – 3 folds, 6 images, 1 text and 1 for greeting)

My 2011 card was pre-planned the previous year when I visited Kew and found the Holly Walk, a pathway behind the temperate house with many different varieties. In November 2011, I waited anxiously for a day with a good weather forecast for little wind and some sunshine with light cloud. My Kew map showed that the path was roughly in a north/south position so that around midday there would be favourable sunlight⁴. Fortunately, there was plenty of sun on the day I chose.

I usually work with manual camera settings, with aperture priority because I want to control the blur of the background. An aperture of about f3.5 would be the choice to do this, and with the shutter speed then coming to around 1/200 second the camera could be hand held. RAW images ensured a leeway to adjust the final pictures.

I had not realised how many different varieties of hollies and their berried fruits there are, so I ended up with a large selection. I decided to make a three-fold small card, so there are eight available surfaces. Six surfaces were used for pictures, one for the holly names, and one for the greeting.

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‘Hollies’ – 3 folds and 6 images.

³RAW images can be taken with many newer cameras as an alternative to JPEGs. They contain far more information, but need a programme such as Lightroom or Photoshop to realise their potential.

⁴Only a few years later a photographic app called LightTrac on my phone now shows up a Google map of anywhere in the world with a superimposed image of the axis lines of the rising and setting sun, and the sunlight position and shadow length at any time of the day, on any date!

'Winter-flowering shrubs'
(card 435 x 145 mm – 2 folds,
5 images on 5 sides, 1 text and
greeting space combined)

The following year I decided to take photographs of the flowers of winter-flowering shrubs, mainly in our own garden. Here I had the opportunity to take several photographs on different occasions to obtain an optimum image.

Here the camera should be set to take 'large' picture files: an enlarged print will need a printing density of around 300 DPI (dots per inch) and this needs more information than an image seen on a screen at the usual density of 72 DPI.

I decided that a two-fold card would allow five larger printed images and show up the flower parts in greater detail. The final choice was difficult and it was sad to have to leave out Madeleine's favourite sweet-smelling sarcococca.

Close up photographs demand an absolute rigidity of both camera and flower to obtain the highest quality of definition. So no wind, and a camera on a tripod with a shutter release cable, will always give the best results.

The more close-up the picture, the less is the depth of field (DOF) in sharp focus. This means that the background is usually pleasantly blurred, but there must be enough DOF to keep the main flower in sharp focus. This means a smaller aperture of say f8 or f11 and very likely a raised ISO if the winter light is not bright enough.

'Winter-flowering shrubs' – 2 folds,
3 photos on one
side, 2 on the other
with plant notes
and space for a
greeting.



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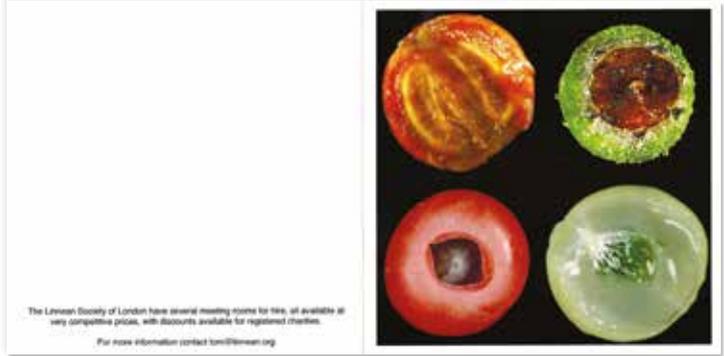
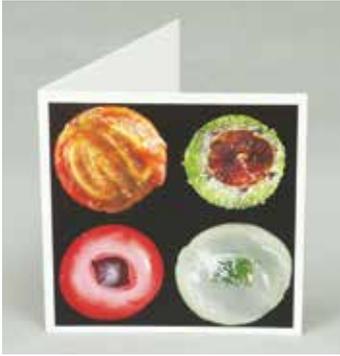
'Barks of winter' – 5 folds, 6 photos on 6 sides on the front,
4 on the back
with notes of the tree names
and a separate space for a
greeting.



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'Christmas fruits' – a card designed for the Linnean Society of London. One fold, 4 photos joined to form 1 image.

'Barks of winter'

(card 435 x 145mm – 4 folds, 10 images, 1 text, 1 greeting)

Taking photographs of bark is a little less demanding because trees stay still.

With enough light, a hand-held camera is the method of choice. Trees with coloured bark can often be easy to recognise, but I have found it far easier to identify the subtle differences of pattern and surface texture in a well-labelled collection. Rosemoor, Westonbirt and Battleston Hill at Wisley are my favourite places.

Trunks are best photographed with the camera held vertically, and a little practice may be needed to keep it still and to keep the trunk all in focus. The long-shaped images mean that the card layout needs some thought, to optimise the space for several vertical pictures. I

chose a five-fold card, which produces twelve 'sides', and this worked well. Incidentally it stood up perfectly on a mantelpiece!

Christmas fruits

(card 290 x 145 mm, single fold, 1 combined image, text on back page)

This card was designed for the Linnean Society of London for their 2011 Christmas card. All the winter fruits are from plants originally named by Linnaeus. The four individual close-ups were taken at a magnification of greater than life size and are therefore true 'macros'. They were taken in studio conditions, that is to say on our kitchen table.

All four were merged into one frame by Photoshop software.

The holly and mistletoe were sagittally sectioned to show the seed developing inside the fruits. A macro lens and extension bellows were used to obtain enough magnification.

Further resolution was obtained by taking a number of different pictures at different depths to disclose a greater depth of field than can be obtained by a single exposure. This is called focus stacking and is becoming a modern close-up photographic technique for recording detail in the third dimension of depth in high magnification. (More details can be found on the author's website – www.botanicalmacro.co.uk)

My concern now is what to do for our next Christmas card! 🌿

John McCormack is a member of the Hertfordshire group. His wife Madeleine was our Vice-Chairman a few years ago.