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Photographing the Landscape

SIMPLY TREES for February 2015 by Eric Berg, Nebraska Forest Service

One of the wonderful things about taking photographs is that it forces us to stop, look at the details and hopefully pay more attention to the world around us. Typically we tend to rush from one place to another without even noticing the details of our ever-changing landscapes. Taking photos demands time and intentionality, it causes us to slow down, gets us outdoors and helps us experience and truly see and capture the beauty and detail of our landscapes.

With digital cameras, the process is far easier and less costly than it used to be. We can take hundreds of photos at one time, with little to no expense, and revisit them later to select the best ones. So the process doesn't require the expense and purposeful, time-consuming effort it did when darkrooms and costly film were part of the process. While technological advances have limited the need for careful intentionality, they have opened up a broad range of opportunities for even the most amateur of photographers.

What makes a good photo? That question can be as subjective as our personal preferences. But the best photos elicit strong emotional reactions—sadness, surprise, anger or pleasure. Often they contain an element of mystery, with the photo framed in a way that hints at something but doesn't give the whole story. They leave the viewer wanting more or give the viewer just enough information to fill in the gaps with their own life experiences.

In terms of placement and focus, the old rule of thirds from photography courses still applies. The most interesting elements in a photo tend to be the most compelling when they are slightly off-center and not in the absolute center of the photo.

Good lighting is essential—whether it's from the back, from the front or captured during that period of "sweet light" which naturally occurs right before or after sunrise or sundown.

Landscapes are constantly changing and one of the advantages of taking photos is to make us more aware of the amazing amount of change that occurs from one month or week or even moment to another. Lighting, temperature, moisture and the resulting frost, dew and color intensity can be significantly different from one hour of the day to another. But these small changes can be visually compelling and will reward anyone patient enough to notice and capture their impact.

It may not be gardening weather but, armed with a camera and a little bit of time, the rewards for photographers can result in a harvest just as tangible.

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