

## **FILTER FUN – A CHEAP AND EASY WAY**

By Bill Black

Normally, or at least frequently, we in photo club competitions stress sharpness in our commentaries and judgments. However, there is another chapter to that story, namely, soft focus.

Soft focus, either complete or partial, can be very appealing, thought provoking and pleasing. There are several ways to achieve this effect. One is to use special screw-on lens filters or those used with holders, such as, Cokin, Lee, Hitech and Singh-Ray. Another is to smear petroleum jelly on a lens or filter. (This is not really recommended since it is difficult to clean off and can permanently damage the lens or filter.) A third method is to use ordinary transparent cellophane paper, such as that used for wrapping gifts. It is the latter that I will discuss here.

First of all, the cellophane can be clear or colored, depending upon the result you wish to achieve. The subjects can be the complete gamut of photography from portraits to scenics to still life to flowers. Let's use flowers as examples since they are readily available and lend themselves nicely to this subject.

Making the filter (diffusion and center sharp)

Diffusion filter – Cut a square piece of the cellophane paper that is about three inches larger than the diameter of whatever lens you choose to use. Center the square over the front of the lens and secure it in place with a rubber band (Figure 1). The degree of diffusion can be adjusted by adding more layers of the cellophane.

Center sharp filter - Cut a square piece of the cellophane paper that is about three inches larger than the diameter of whatever lens you choose to use. Place a coin, such as a penny, approximately at the center of the square, and using an Xacto knife cut around the coin. Alternatively, if you do not have an Xacto knife, fold the square in half, place half the coin at the folded edge of the square and cut around the coin. Unfold the square and, voila, you have a circle. Place the square over the front of the lens and secure it in place with a rubber band. Actually, you do not have to center the hole since you might want to have your center of interest, that is, the sharpest part, to be off center.

Choosing a lens

For general subjects any lens can be used. However, for floral work a macro or close focusing lens is ideal. The purpose is to eliminate or at least minimize any distracting elements. I find a close focusing zoom lens to be the better choice since it enables me to compose easier and control the area of diffusion. My preferred lens is a 70-210mm, 58mm diameter that has served me very well for many applications since about 1980.

Selecting the aperture

For complete diffusion the aperture selection, that is, the f-stop, is not very important. For center sharp it is obviously desirable to have that specific area in focus. In either case a reasonable starting point is f8. I recommend using the camera's aperture preferred mode and let the shutter speed be what it may. The only caveats are the environmental conditions, namely, wind which will cause flower movement if you are outdoors and your ability to steadily hand hold a camera. As usual, I advocate the use of a tripod.

### Selecting the shutter speed

As stated above, shutter speed is not terribly important. If there is a breeze, then 1/250 may be necessary. Most people can hand hold 1/125 without any shaking problems. So the main thing is to pay attention to the shutter speed that is indicated for the selected aperture.

### Focusing

Obviously when using a diffusion filter it is going to be difficult to determine the degree of sharpness with the filter on the lens. Actually, it is not at all important since the subject is effectively out of focus anyway. With the center sharp filter you will want to have that area sharp or at least reasonably so. Hence, the suggestion to start with an aperture of f8; this will result in reasonable depth of field when close focusing.

### Show and Tell

The following photos are examples of a totally in focus close-up of a dahlia. These demonstrate how filters can significantly change the appearance of the final image.



Figure 1. Cellophane attached to lens with rubber band



Figure 2. The basic set-up

The dahlia was photographed on a bright sunny day. The camera was on a tripod. The lens was a 70-210mm. The aperture was f8 and the shutter speed 1/250.



Figure 3. Diffused dahlia

Without moving the camera, the cellophane was attached to the front of the lens. The aperture and the shutter speed remained the same.



Figure 4. Center sharp dahlia

Without moving the camera the cellophane with a 1/2-inch hole cut in the center was attached to the front of the lens. The aperture and the shutter speed remained the same.

Note: All photos were originally shot with color transparency film and converted to black & white via Photoshop.

#### The bottom line

As you can see, making cellophane filters is very simple. You can produce interesting, pleasant and even provocative images. Each of the above images is very acceptable depending upon your taste or purpose of the moment. If you are establishing a photo business, for example, note cards and post cards, you might want to try a set of each technique, be they all sharp, all diffused or center sharp. If you are selling to a commercial agency, then, quite frankly, you never know what the editor or selector has in mind. As far as camera club competitions go, do not obsess over scores received. Some of the judges and commentators will not be enamored with soft focus. Others will like the technique very much and be very complimentary. In the end, it will be what YOU like. Give it a try. It's cheap and easy.