

# Digital Photography

If you haven't noticed, it is very hard to find any "film" cameras for sale anymore. In fact, before too long, it will probably be hard to find any film, period. The world has gone digital and that certainly applies to photography. So, if you haven't got on that band wagon yet, what are your options?

At the moment, we have people at all stages of the digital game. Some have ignored it totally and stuck with a film camera, taking their film to be developed and having prints made. Others have gone to the next step and have purchased a digital camera. However, if they lack a home computer they are still reliant on others to do the "developing and printing" work. Of course, with a digital camera, the images you take are already developed but unless you know how to get them out of the camera and into some other media they are pretty worthless. Of course, film developers are still standing by to help you. All you need to do is remove the memory chip from your camera and give to a film processor and they will print your photos for you, and also give you a CD with the digital images. But if you don't have a computer that CD will only serve to act as a coaster for your evening cocktail.

In the bad old early days of digital photography you had to buy a PC or a Mac if you wanted to print your photos yourself, but not anymore. Now there are many inkjet printers on the market that will produce very nice glossy prints without the aid of a computer. Of course, these printers don't provide many of the tools that photo processing with a computer can deliver nor do they provide any of the flexibility that can be achieved with a computer.

Going the next step and buying a computer to process your own digital images can be a very daunting exercise if you've never used a computer before. If you have used a PC and consider yourself to have average skills, then you should definitely look into to doing your own image processing. It's not difficult. If you already know how to use a computer for such things as word processing or tracking your finances you already have most of the requisite skills. If not, I recommend that you start signing up for some classes at your local adult education facility.

The ultimate in digital photography is to forget all about making those 4 X 6 prints, but you can still easily do that if you wish. Usually, once folks get accustomed to loading their digital images into their PC they forget all about printing them, unless they want a real fancy print suitable for framing. If all they want is to be able to show their pictures to others there are all sorts of neat options for doing that without spending a lot of money on photo paper. One thing I'm sure everyone has seen are those neat digital picture frames which can show a continuous slide show of whatever photos you have loaded into them. I've got one and it uses a standard memory chip. When I want to change the show I just take the chip to my computer and load in the new photos. But there are also myriad portable devices including some really jazzy things like the new iPhone where you can make phone calls and also show folks your latest photos.

One thing we all go through when we finally convert to digital photography is deciding what to do with all those “legacy” photos—the old prints and slides that we have been accumulating for decades. They contain some of our most treasured memories so we certainly don’t want to ignore them. What many of us end up doing is inviting them to the digital party. That is normally done by having them scanned into digital images. You can do it yourself like we did, but unless you have a lot of patience and a lot of time, I don’t recommend that. There are many professional services that will scan old photos or slides for a reasonable price. After you’ve tried doing it yourself you quickly learn the value of these services. However, if you do decide to do it yourself you’ll need to give careful consideration to what sort of scanner is needed for the job. If all you are doing is scanning old prints, most of the inexpensive bed scanners will do nicely, as will the scanning facilities built into multi-function printers. However, if you plan to scan slides or negatives, I would definitely recommend buying a scanner that is specialized for that purpose. The very small area of a slide requires a lot more resolution that is offered by the typical bed scanner.

When we finished scanning our old photos we did the unthinkable—we threw out all our old photos. We had over 22 big, thick albums of photos and they all went in the trash (probably illegal nowadays). Why? Beside the fact that they were taking up a lot of shelf space, it occurred to us that no one was going to want them when we are gone. Our one and only child is almost 40 and very much into the digital age. He might be willing to hang onto a few CDs full of photos, but it was very unlikely that he would be willing to find a home for all those volumes of photos.

Another problem is that the golden age of the slide show has long passed away. No longer can you demand people’s attention in any unrestricted way to pay attention to your pictures. The whole idea of sequestering your friends or relatives in a dark room to watch slides is almost unthinkable—do it once and they will never return. Likewise, stopping all conversation to demand that friends spend time looking at a pile of photos or a big photo album is also unacceptable. Today, we are besieged by images coming at us from all directions, so we need to exercise caution and be discreet about asserting our own images. Instead of handing a friend a pile of photos we might, if it is done with finesse, hand him or her our iPhone and say, “check this out, the kid is really growing up.” We’ve asked them to view just one photo and it needs to be a good one, expressive of the subject’s personality, properly framed and focused, and full of brilliant color.

We now have all our legacy photos converted to digital images and those 22 albums of photos now fit into one small CD wallet. Imagine what can be done with that. Suppose you have some close friends that you have known for many years. You probably have hundreds of photos that include them, but those pictures have been scattered throughout your various albums. But if you have digitized all your photos, you can easily gather all those photos together and make a CD for your friends that includes the whole history of your relationships with them. There’s that camping trip that you shared twenty years ago, the birthday party for their first-born, the cruise

you took together ten years ago. Suppose you are sending an email to a friend and you have been discussing some long ago event in your lives, why not grab a photo from your digital library to include in the email to make it more attention grabbing.

Getting into the wonderful world of digital photography is just as enabling as getting into computing in general. We often hear that the world is now divided between those who are connected to the internet and those who are not. The same division exists between those still back in the film world and those who have fully embraced digital photography. If you are not familiar with that world, imagine a place where you can take literally hundreds of photos without ever having to change film canisters and where you don't really care whether each picture is perfect or not because every time you shoot a subject you take numerous shots using different angles and different exposure schemes. You hope that one of them will be great and if the others are not so great nothing is lost; you just delete them. And after taking all those pictures, you download them to your computer and examine them using software programs such as Adobe's Photoshop. If they aren't to your liking you can do your own "developing" work such as cropping, changing or enhancing color balance, brightening, increasing contrast, etc. This was all stuff that only those who had darkroom equipment could have done, and they needed lots of equipment, lots of developer products and lots of expensive photo papers. When you are done with your electronic "developing" you can just stash the image away on your hard disk for future use, print it out on high-gloss photo paper using your inkjet printer, make it part of an electronic slide show to be loaded onto your digital picture frame or displayed on your TV, or put it on your family website. By the way, if you do make prints using your ink jet printer, you will be amazed at the high quality. In many cases, you will get better prints than you did when you had film images printed by film development services. Most ink jet printers can do prints up to 8" X 10" and some can do much larger prints. Also, some ink jet printers have specialized arrangements for doing quantities of 4" X 6" snapshot images

The massaging of digital images via home computer can be done at many levels ranging from the simplest and least expensive to the highly professional and very expensive. The learning curve for the use of this type of software can range from just an hour or so for the simple programs to hundreds of hours for the more complex software. My wife Carolyn has spent untold hours and many classroom sessions learning the ins and outs of Adobe Photoshop. As a result, she can take an old faded photograph that has been scanned and turn it into a perfectly color balanced masterpiece with no specks, no cracks or any of the other artifacts often found in old pictures. But that's way beyond what most amateur digital photographers will ever want to do, or need to do with respect to enjoying the technology.

Lastly, we need to consider the ultimate use of digital photos, and that's to share them with others by displaying them on your family website or through a web-based photo storage service. The former is for those who want to bite off the learning curve for creating websites and the latter is the easy route that most folks take. Displaying your photos on your website gives you total freedom to decide which pictures to display and how many. Typically, if I take a hundred

images of some family outing I'll probably only display twenty of them on our website. If you look at the pictures displayed on this website that will give you an example. As you will note, I'm not into fancy displays. I like to let the photos speak for themselves.

We recently bought a new 52" Sony lcd, HDTV. It came with a wonderful new facility for displaying slide shows through its USB port. All we need to do is load up a thumb drive with photos, plug it into the USB port, and then issue a few on-screen menu commands to start a slide show. We soon learned that the 16 X 9 format of HDTV could be replicated by one of the format options on our digital camera (Panasonic Lumix). If we take photos in that format, we can have screen-filling slide shows on our new TV. Given all the nasty things I've said about slide shows, why would I want to have an electronic version? Showing photos on your TV is a very different matter than the old fashioned slide show that involved a darkened room, a slide projector and a screen. You can view photos on the screen of your TV without dimming the lights and also without ceasing all conversation not related to the photos. I usually just let the slide show run in a loop, treating it as a sort of visual background. That way our guests can either view the photos or ignore them.

This essay was originally written for publication in a magazine so I made no assumptions about what sort of equipment the readers might have; however, the fact that you are reading this on your computer changes the environment. I no longer have to encourage you to buy a computer as you obviously already have one. But I do want to encourage you to explore all the many dimensions of digital photography. That is one area of home computing that has a huge payoff both in terms of practicality and enjoyment.