Introduction

A few years ago, I was drawn to the possibility of creating analogue images from environmentally sound chemical sources. As many who have gone the same route before, I experimented with cyanotypes and even salt prints. However, despite being relatively non-toxic (especially in the case of cyanotypes), I still sought to find a photographic process that would combine simple elements like sunlight and water with a natural photosensitive emulsion to create an image. This led me to the research of the early photographic pioneer Sir John Herschel and his experimentation with flower pigments, which he called the anthotype process (1842).

This process simply combines flower extracts, water and prolonged exposure to sunlight. Only the visible spectrum acts upon the emulsion. It is certainly possible to use plant matter other than flowers; fruits or vegetables work to some extent as well, but for the purpose of this article I will restrict myself to my work with flowers. To date, many species of flowering plants remain yet to be explored, thus offering seemingly endless possibilities for experimentation. It is my aim here to document a proven method for creating anthotypes and by doing so inspire others to produce images straight out of their gardens, fostering new experimentation. It is a very elegant and beautiful way to make images, as well as being safe for all age groups.

History

The photo-sensitive properties of plants and vegetables have been known to scholars for centuries. Among many early observations the experiments of Henri August Vogel in Paris are of particular interest. He found in 1816 that alcoholic tinctures of red carnation, violet or corn poppy turned white behind blue glass within a few days, while remaining unchanged behind red glass after the same time. Cotton and paper colored with these tinctures showed similar reactions.