

Digital shutterbugs swarm stores this holiday season

By Bruce A. Love

Last summer, millions of 17-year locust larva emerged from their long sleep and transformed into flying red-eyed windshield decorations. This holiday season, a swarm of shutterbugs will emerge from their sleep, and transform into digital photographers, as they discover a new breed of camera underneath their Christmas trees. Photography, as we used to know it, has undergone dramatic changes in recent years. Digital photography offers many new options for both amateur and professional photographers.

Digital cameras come in many shapes and sizes, and many have an impressive set of features that will interest even the most sophisticated photographer. However, evaluating these cameras can be confusing. There are several specifications that are important when selecting a digital camera.

Resolution, measured in megapixels, is an important indicator of image quality potential. Megapixels (millions of picture elements) refer to the number of dots that make up a picture. Currently, 3-4 Megapixel cameras are most common, and can produce outstanding photographs. The most expensive digital cameras now boast as high as 8 megapixels. The higher the number, the sharper and bigger the image will be. Most cameras allow you to select image qualities that are less than the maximum advertised resolution. These lower resolution settings generally produce very acceptable results, and allow you to fit more pictures on your camera before it becomes necessary to delete them, or move them to your computer.

Zoom power is another important consideration. Like traditional cameras, zoom refers to the amount of magnification the camera can produce. Numbers such as "3X" or "4X" refer to the amount of magnification potential relative to an unmagnified image. Most middle and high-end cameras have both digital zoom and optical zoom capabilities. Optical zoom specs are much more important. Digital zooms distort images as they enlarge. Optical zooms do not.

Memory size directly impacts the number of pictures a digital camera will hold. If a camera only has built-in memory, there is no option for increasing its capacity to store images. Most digital cameras come with a small amount of expandable memory, which can be replaced with

a larger memory card in order to give your camera the ability to hold more pictures.

The amount of resolution, zoom, and memory, all significantly impact the price of a digital camera. Other features available on high-end cameras also affect price. These include flash capability, and the ability to manually set exposure levels, make short audio-video movie clips, produce time-lapse photography, and perform other actions photographers desire.

There are some major benefits to digital photography:

- No film costs
- No traditional developing costs
- Instantly view images on camera's LCD viewer
- Print photos from home PC
- Ability to store images on computer hard disk or other storage media.
- Free and easy editing tools available for retouching flawed photographs

There are some significant hidden costs associated with digital photography, especially if you intend to print many of the pictures you take. If your printer is more than three years old, it won't matter how many megapixels your camera is, you will need a newer model to fully appreciate the quality of your digital camera.

The cost of photo paper and ink also can be substantial. There is a wide range of prices associated with "photo paper" for inkjet printers. I recently bought a 40-pack of the top-of-the-line photo paper for about \$30. I wish I could say that a cheaper paper is just as good, but the saying "you get what you pay for," comes to mind after seeing the brilliant colors of Kodak Ultra Photo paper. Kodak claims that photos on this paper will last more than 100 years. Some photos that I printed on cheaper paper faded after just a few months.

Even if you do not have a personal computer, digital cameras are still an option. Many K-Marts, CVSs, and others, will print photos directly from your camera's memory module. Some new printers also provide sockets that accept all of the camera memory formats. This way you can plug your memory module directly into the printing device - no PC required! If you are considering purchasing a digital camera, be aware of the hidden costs, and find one that matches your artistic and budgetary requirements.

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