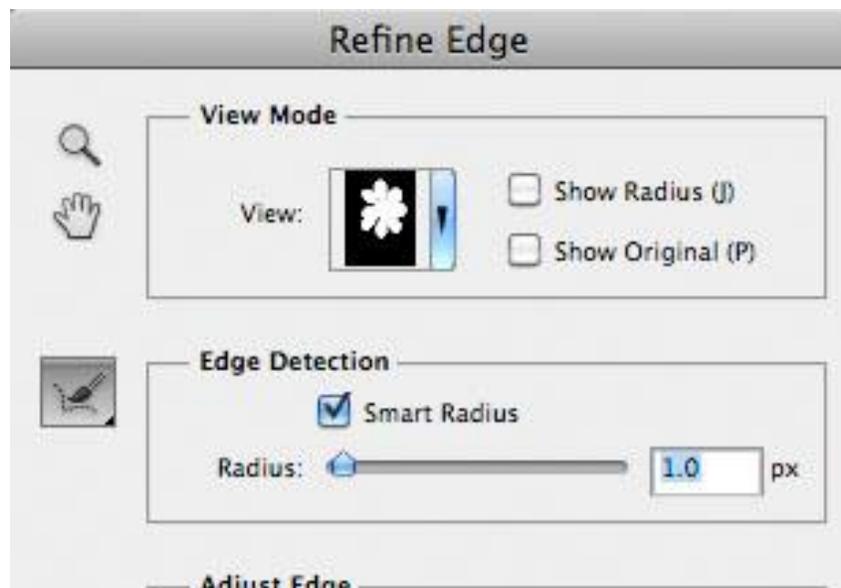


How to blur a background in Photoshop CS3, Elements 9 or later

By Steve Zimic

This is a technique I developed which allows blurring of the background without any bleeding of the main subject into the background. This technique does require a working knowledge of the various selection tools in PS. The quality of the result almost entirely depends on how well you are able to select the main subject.

Step 1 - Open your image in PS and if the image has any layers it would be advisable to flatten the image so you only have a background layer. Start with the quick selection tool and slowly work the tool to select the main subject that is NOT to be blurred. Remember to zoom in on areas that the quick selection tool has trouble defining and use a smaller brush. If the background is not distinctly different from your main subject(s), the quick selection tool may not work and you'll have to work with the lasso tool to manually either add or subtract from what you've selected to this point. When using the lasso tool, the feathering in the options bar should be set to zero. Just clicking and dragging with the lasso tool will most likely lose any previous selection so be sure to hold the shift or option (PC alt) keys down to either add or subtract from the selection. When the marching ants selection looks good, you'll want to use the 'refine edge' command ('select > refine edge') to let Photoshop tweak the selection to perfection. For this technique I usually check the 'edge detection' box and set the radius to 1 pixel. If the edges of your main subject are not perfectly sharp you may want to increase the radius until the selection preview looks good.



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Here's what your image should look like when you're done with the selection.



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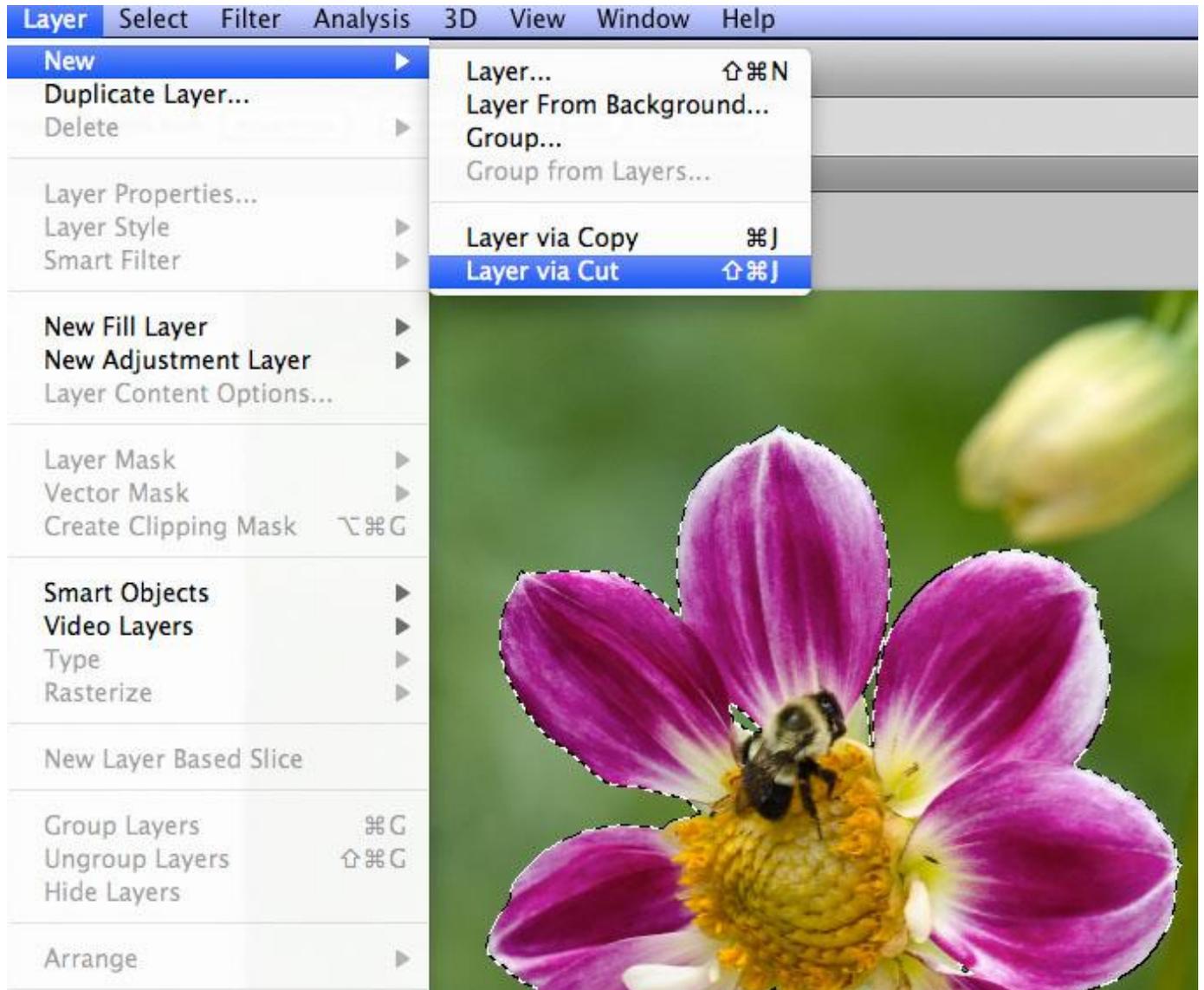
The stem in this image is quite blurred but I'd like to include it as part of the main subject. The quick selection tool was not able to differentiate the stem from the background so I decided to use the Quick Mask (not available in Photoshop Elements). Enter the quick mask mode (keyboard shortcut 'Q'). Quick mask gives you a visual interpretation of the selection without those marching ants and allows you to paint a selection using the brush tool. For this image I used a very soft brush and painted in the stem. Choose either black or white as the color depending on how your quick mask tool is set up. Press 'Q' again to exit the quick mask mode. Below is the final selection. Don't worry if the marching ants don't reflect the selection correctly as they won't show partially selected pixels less than 50% opacity.



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Step 2 - Reset the foreground/background colors by pressing the letter 'D' on your keyboard and then press the letter 'X' to set the background color to black. In the menu bar go to layer > new > layer via cut. This will take the selected area and place it on a new layer while removing it from the background layer. The hard part is done. Turn off the visibility of the layer that has your main subject - probably labeled 'layer 1' and then target (click on) the background layer.



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Step 3 - You should now see the background image only with a black cut out where your main subject used to be. Select the magic wand tool and in the options bar, make sure the 'contiguous' box is checked and the tolerance is set to 5 or less. Click inside the black area. If you have more than one main subject, hold down the shift key and click on the other black area(s) that need to be selected. Next go to select > modify > expand and enter 10 to 20 pixels. This will now include some of the background as part of the selection.

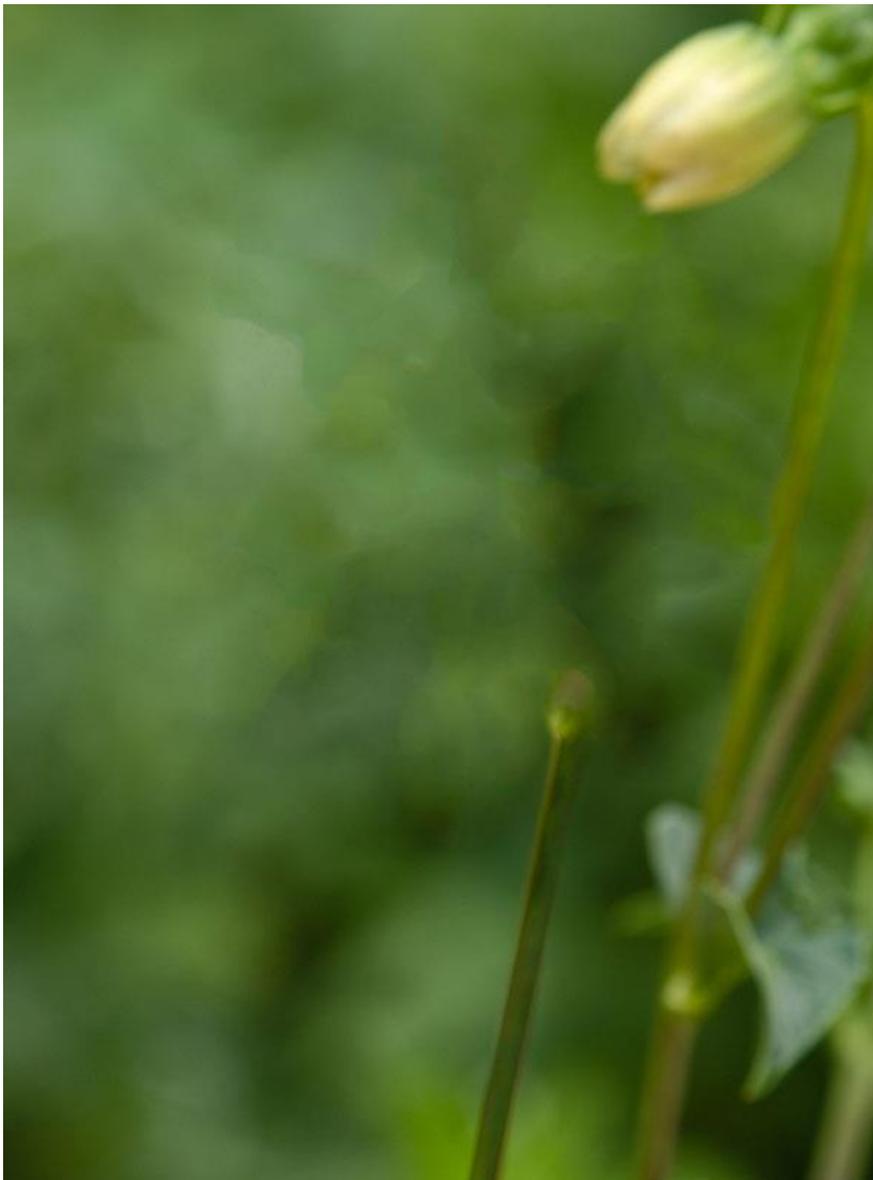


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Step 4 -Here's the fun part. You want to fill that black area with surrounding pixels. Go to edit > fill > content aware. This may take a while depending on the size of your image and the area to be filled. You should wind up with a background that has no part of the main subject included.

Since Elements users don't have the content aware fill, you'll have to fill the black area with a solid color. Go to edit > fill and from the drop down menu pick 'color'. That will open a color picker and your cursor will change to an eyedropper. You can move the color picker window out of the way if it blocks too much of your image. Click with the eyedropper in an area that represents the majority of colors in the background and press OK twice. Although your result will look considerably different than the image below, the next step will take care of that.



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Step 5 - If you still have those marching ants, press command (PC control) 'D' to deselect. With the background layer still targeted, go to filter > blur > Gaussian blur and move the slider all the way to the right to completely blur the background or less if so desired. Turn the visibility of the other layer (your main subject) back on and you're done.

