Adobe Photoshop: How to clean up a raster image for tracing

If you plan to trace an object in a raster image, sometimes it is helpful to remove as much of the background as possible. This will avoid autotracing unneeded background elements and result in a cleaner trace of the desired object. Consider the following image:
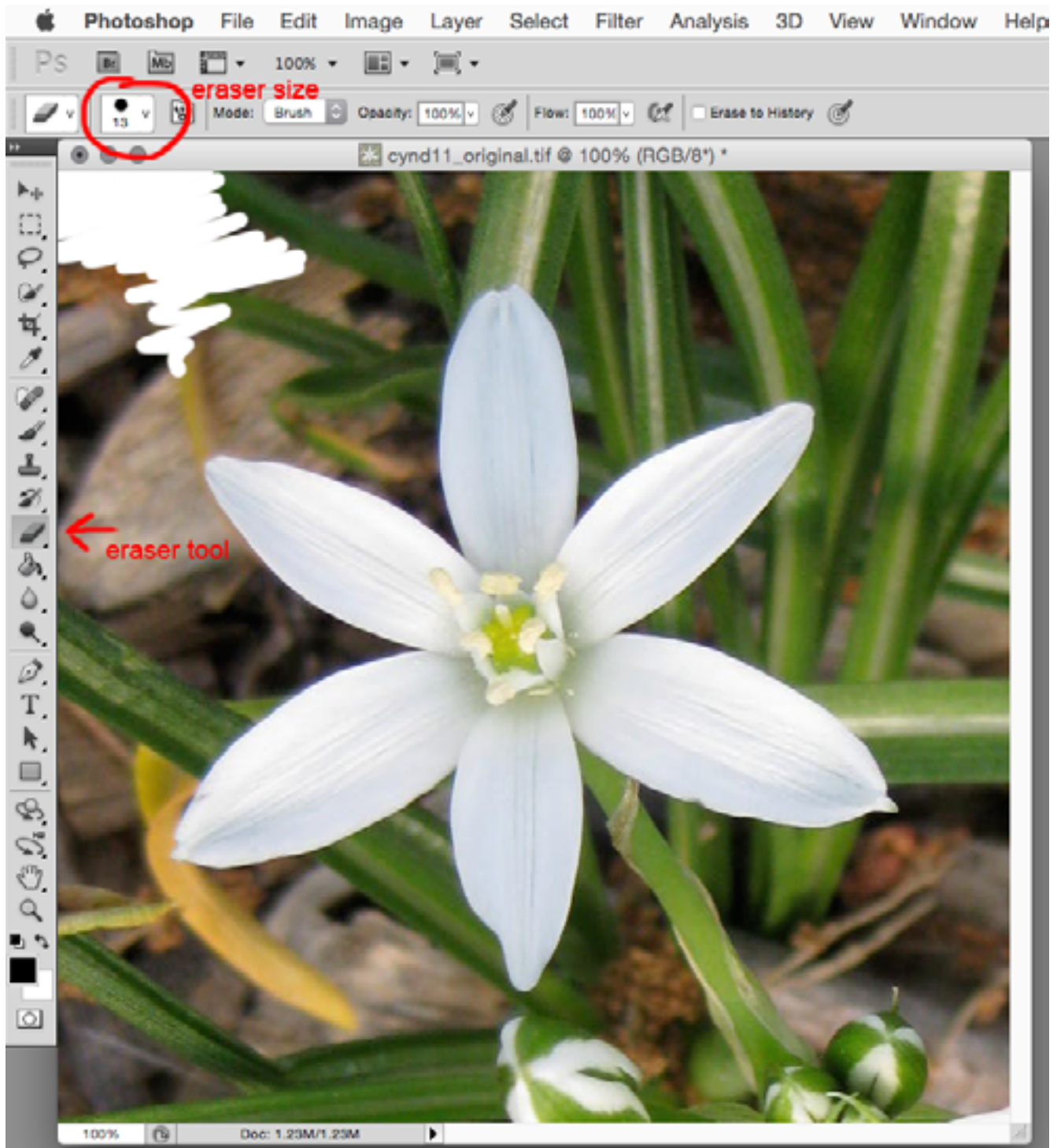

We want to trace the flower only, in a vector program. The presence of the stems and rocks will complicate any autotracing that is done. So we want to end up with a file that shows just the flower with background removed.
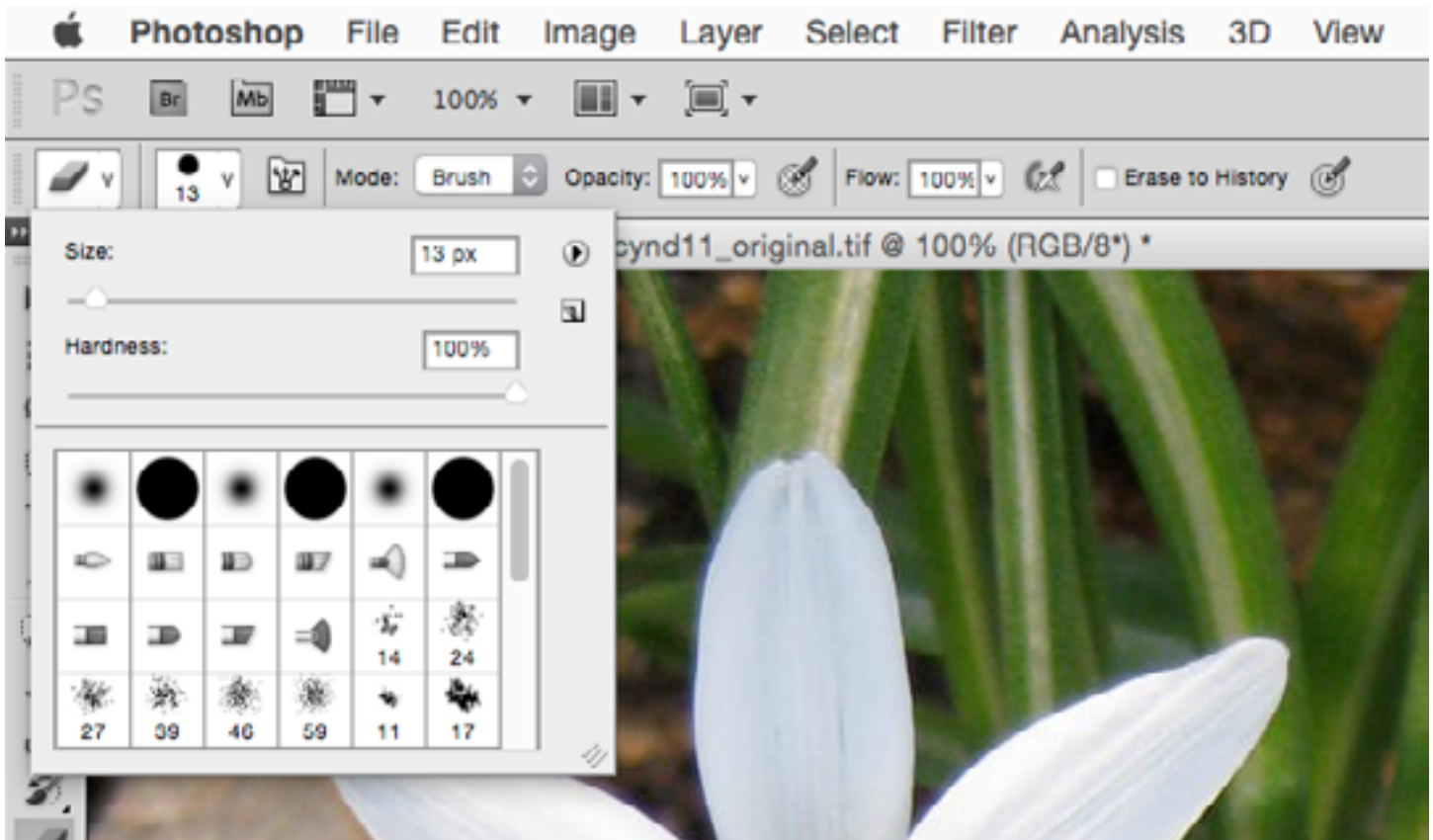
There are many ways to do this in Photoshop, and sometimes the best method depends on the contrast of the image as well as other factors. We will cover two of the simplest methods.
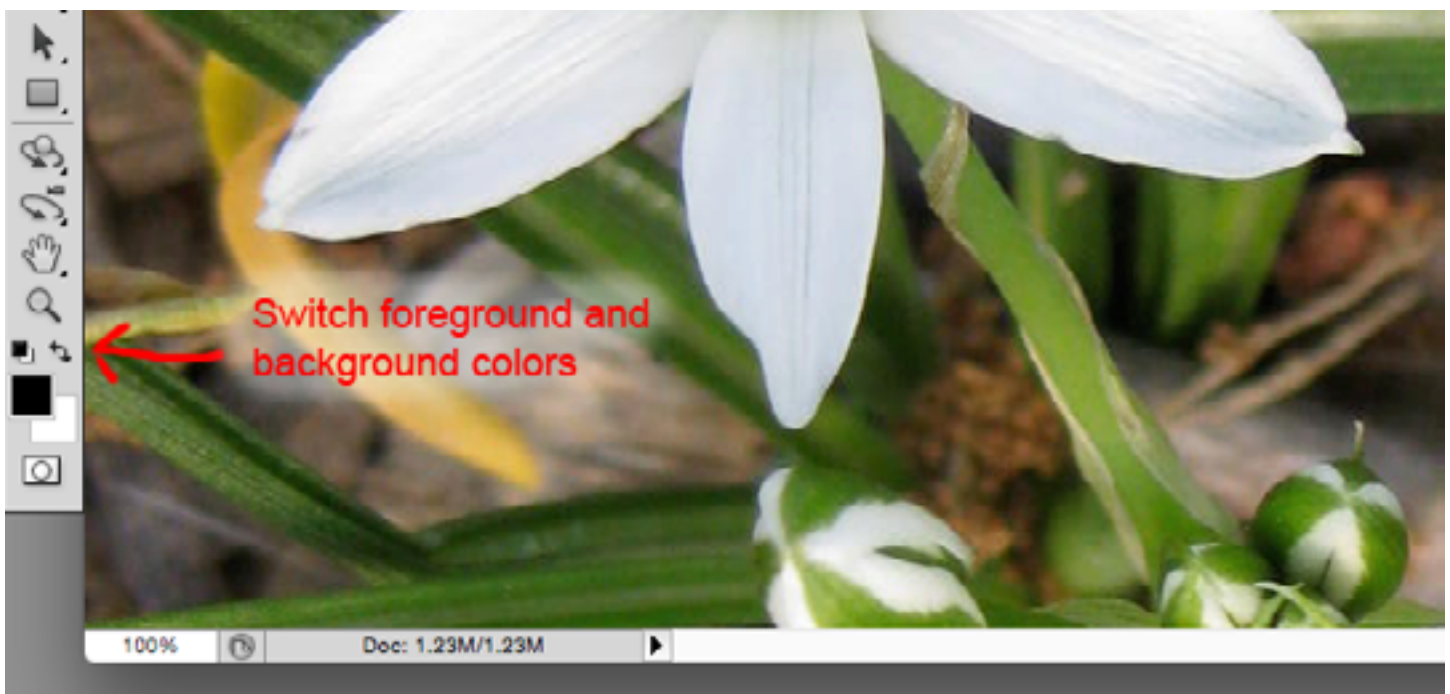
Method 1: Erase the background

The brute force method of isolating the flower is to use the eraser tool and erase any pixels you want to remove. Just choose the eraser tool, set a size, and erase the background:

You can change the size and hardness (fuzzy vs sharp edge) of the eraser by changing the controls in the menu. Or choose a different brush from the palette.

With an image like this where the object we are keeping is white, it can be helpful to change the background color to black first. Just click on the Switch Foreground and Background Colors tool to do that.

To get the tiny details like the places where the petals meet to a point, zoom in to the area and change the eraser to a smaller size (1 pixel works well).
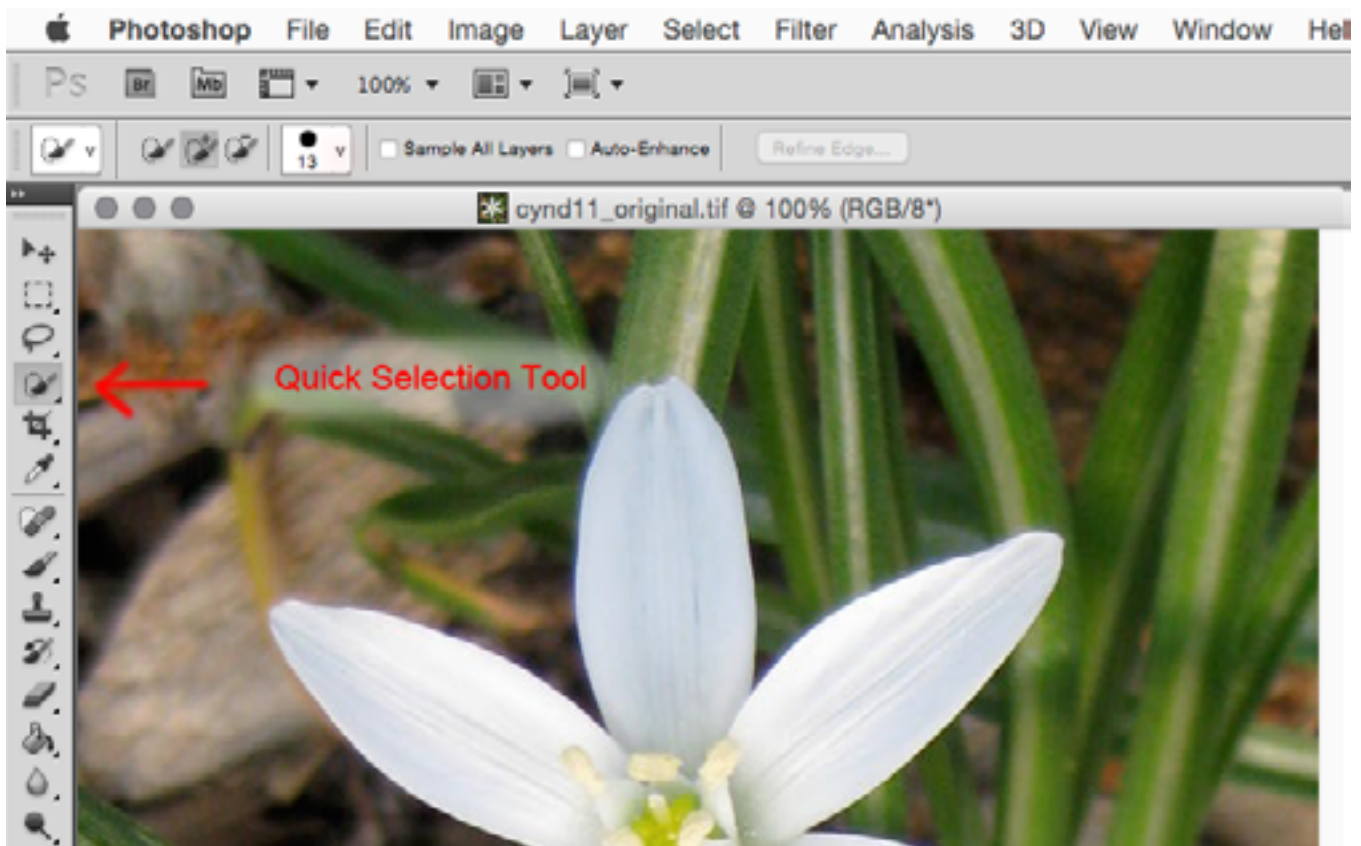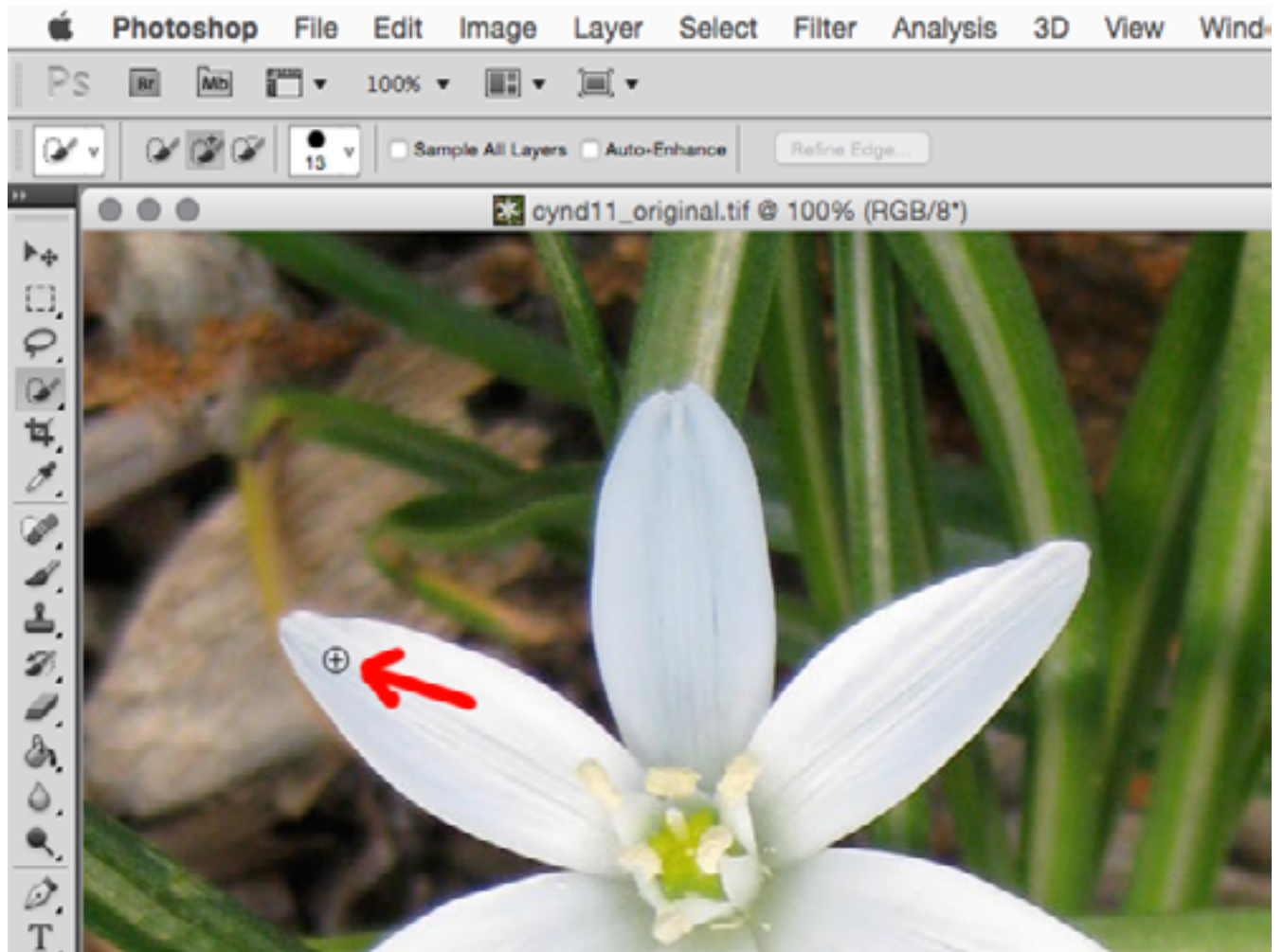
Final result:
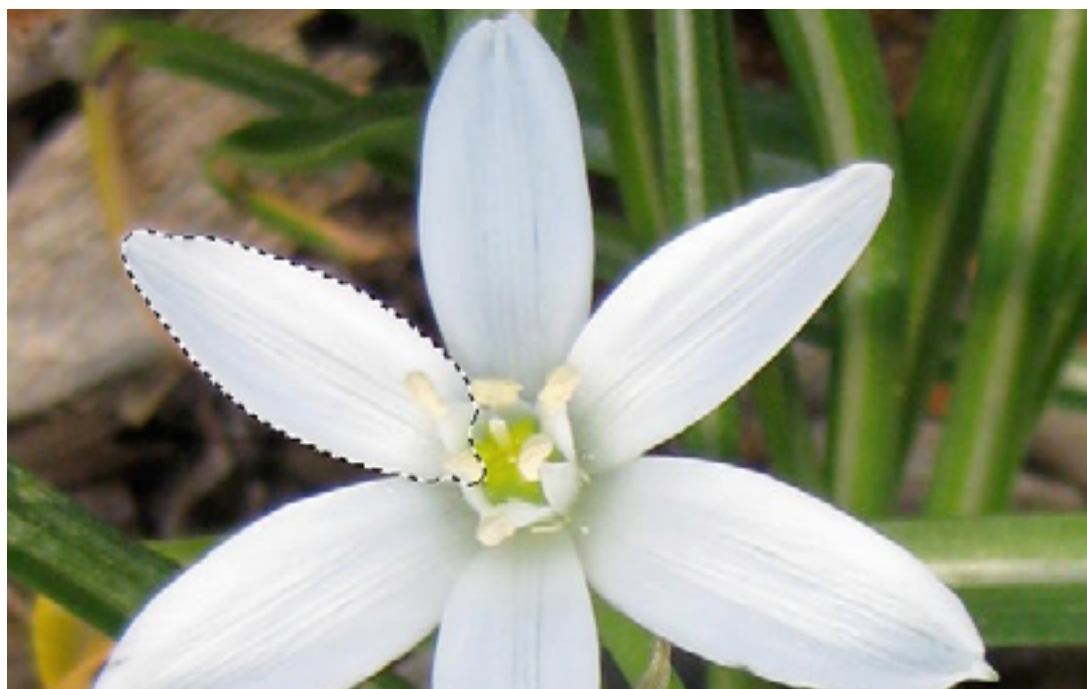

Method 2: Quick Selection Tool

If there is sufficient contrast between the object and the background, as there is in this image, there is a much faster way to do the job: the Quick Selection Tool.

Choose the tool and click inside a flower petal, near the edge:
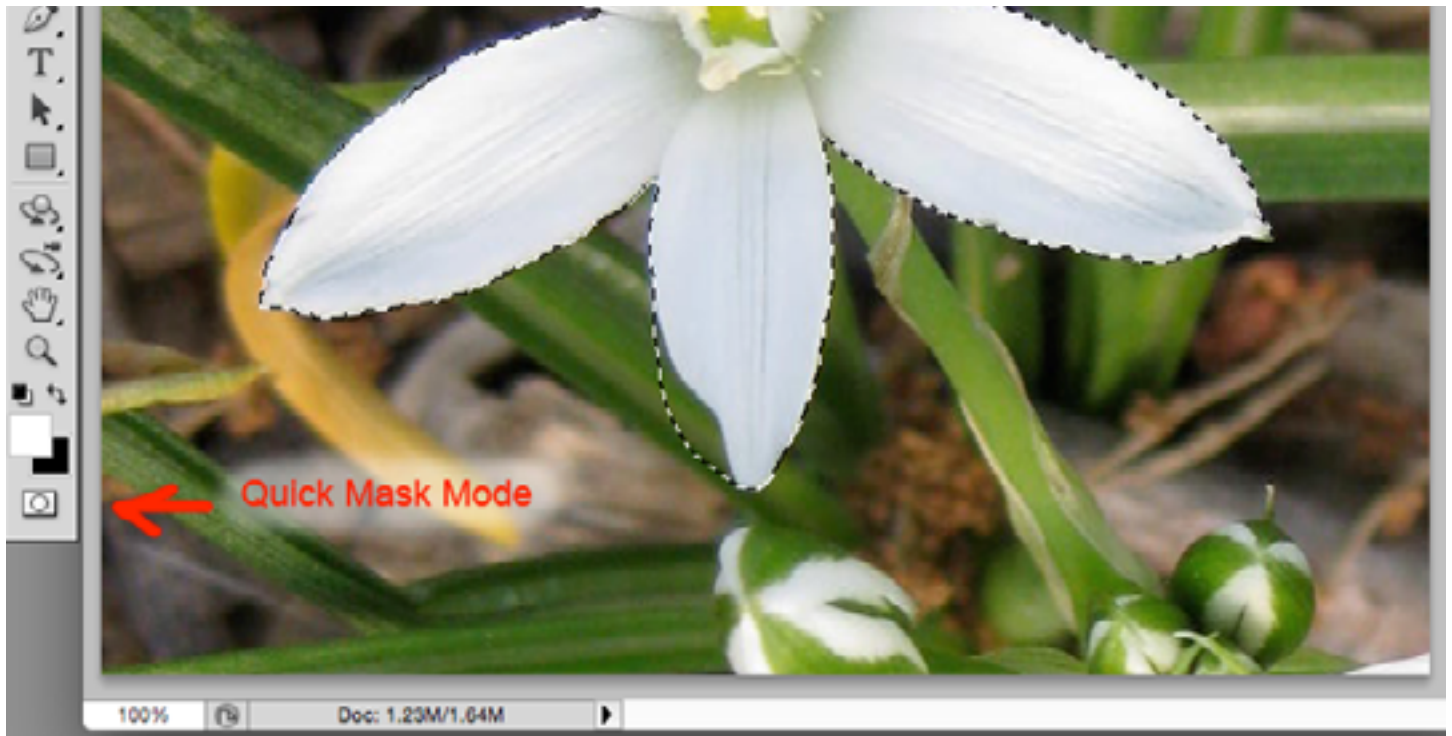

Result: the petal is selected.

Repeat this operation on each of the petals by clicking on them.

What if the quick selection tool doesn't select everything you want perfectly, as in the example below?
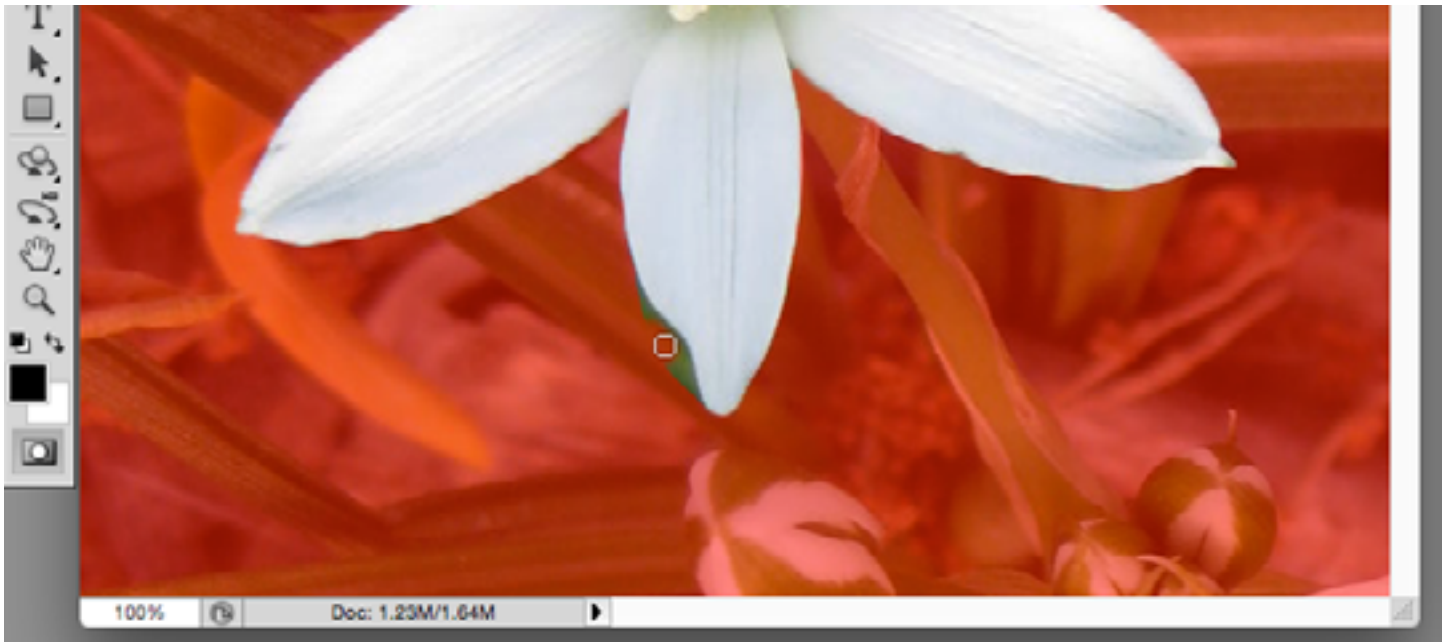
The easiest way to fix this is to use Quick Mask Mode. Click on the tool.

The selected area will be clear while the unselected area will be indicated in a red color:
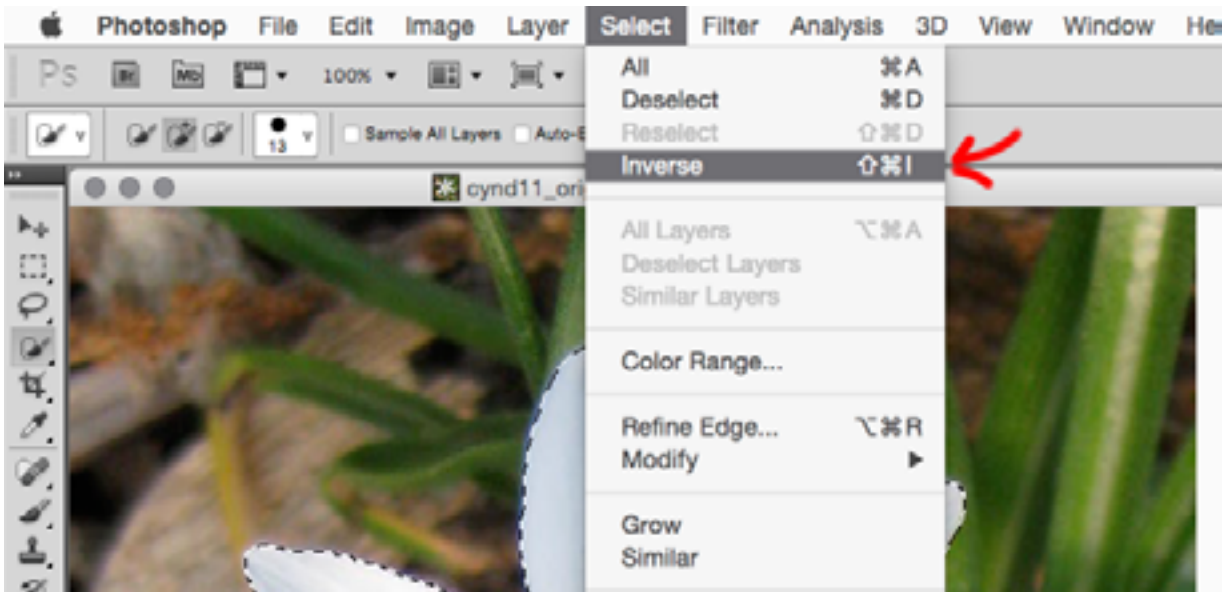
Use the brush tool and the eraser tool to adjust the red area until only the desired object is in the clear area.
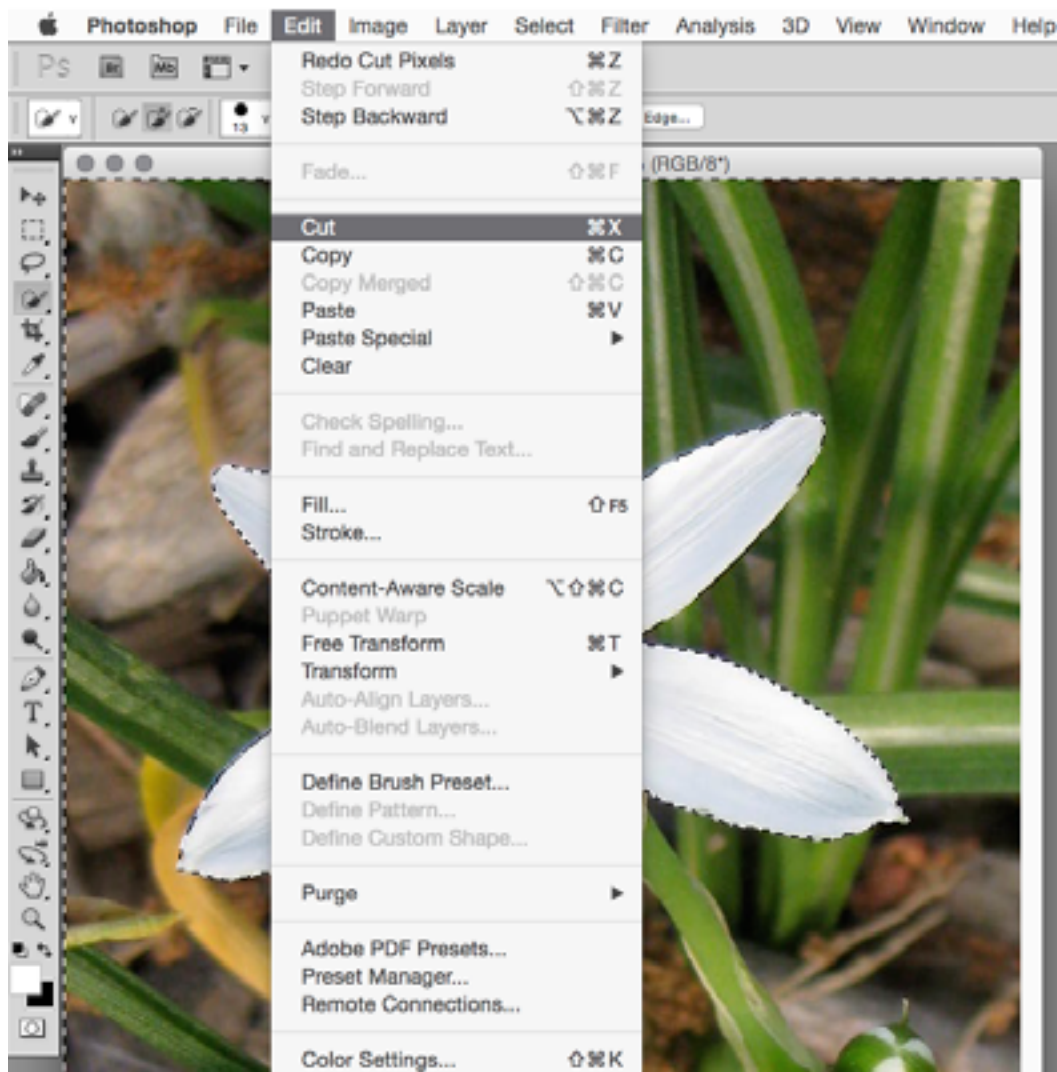

When you are finished, click the Quick Mask Mode tool again to return to selection mode.

To isolate the flower from the background, the background needs to be filled with black (or whatever color you prefer). First, select the background by inverting the selection; choose Inverse from the Select menu:

Then choose Cut from the Edit menu, making sure that black is the background color. Alternatively, you could choose Fill...Contents Use: Black (or another color).

Final result: