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# Marigold – More than Meets the Eye!

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The marigold is probably one of the most versatile flowers you can grow in your garden. All parts of the plant were used as far back as medieval times for a variety of culinary, medicinal, and cosmetic purposes.

Through the centuries, marigolds have been planted as natural repellants to garden pests. In addition, African marigolds and French marigolds have recently been used in controlling root-knot nematodes when rotated or interplanted with other garden grown vegetables.

My mother-in-law always planted marigolds and petunias around her vegetable garden, saying that their strong smell kept rabbits, squirrels, cats, dogs, and other small animals away from her produce. Today's experts put the kibosh on that idea, but the practice of planting marigolds as a pest deterrent is a tradition that I have always followed as well. The only time I ever had a problem with rabbits and other critters was the year I planted marigolds only on entrance to my garden (a fence borders the backside) and left both ends open.

Does it work? I don't know, but it's a practice I intend to continue for the bright bursts of yellows and oranges that marigold transplants lend to the borders of my just-planted garden plot.

The most common types of marigold are the pot marigold, the tall African marigold, and the robust French marigold. Although originating in different parts of the world, these true marigolds are all members of the large aster family. One marigold, the marsh marigold, isn't really a marigold at all!

## Marsh Marigolds

A wildflower from the buttercup family (Ranunculaceae), the marsh marigold is a water plant you find growing along creek banks in early spring. The bright yellow flowers of the marsh marigold are easy to mistake for the cowslip. Both are widespread over Europe, Asia, and the U.S. However, the cowslip is a denizen of fields and pastures while the water-loving marsh marigold inhabits sloughs and stream banks.

Like true marigolds, marsh marigolds have been used for medicinal purposes throughout history and have appeared in literature as far back as the time of Shakespeare. The complete plant is edible but bitter in taste if eaten raw. Most often, the leaves are cooked and eaten like spinach.

The marsh marigold sprouts from large tufts of growth that spawn large, glossy, kidney-shaped leaves and long, hollow stems, which seem to split into two flower stalks, each bearing a single blossom that may reach two inches in diameter.



You may see wild marsh marigolds in bloom from mid-March through June, but then this demure plant seems to vanish as quickly as it appeared in the spring!

Definitely a wildflower, the plant is an herbaceous perennial that is well suited as an addition to garden pond edges. Tolerant of light levels from full sun to part shade, the marsh marigold is also a good choice for container gardening in shallow water features.

To grow the marsh marigold, keep the soil mucky. The marsh marigold is one plant that does like wet feet! Even during dormancy, be sure to keep the soil moist. Propagate the marsh marigold by dividing its roots in the autumn.

## Pot Marigolds

Pot marigold blossoms, originally only single and bright yellow, have been bred to be double and multicolored. An edible herb as well as a bright and cheerful flower, the pot marigold grows from 18 to 20 inches tall. Although nursery plants are readily available in the spring, pot marigolds are easily started by seeding them directly into the garden.



The pot marigold, also called the English marigold and the common marigold is indigenous to Europe and the Mediterranean/. Some sources indicate that it may even date back as far back as ancient Egypt. Its Latin name, *Calendula officinalis* comes directly from the Romans who believed that blossoms opened on the first day of each month, the calends.

For centuries, it was believed that the pot marigold opened in the morning and closed at night. This trait has often been mentioned in literature, most notably by Shakespeare in "A Winter's Tale" where he

wrote, "*The Marigold that goes to bed wi' th' sun, And with him rises weeping...*"

When sown during early spring in a sunny location, provided the area has good drainage, even average soil provides a summer's worth of brilliant yellow to deep orange flowers. An advantage of growing the pot marigold is that the plant reseeds itself throughout the summer into the first frosts of autumn.

### **Pot Marigold Trivia**

Old literature contains many references to the culinary, cosmetic and medicinal virtues of the pot marigold. With the ever-increasing popularity of homeopathic medicines and the return to herbal remedies, the pot marigold has found a new place in the home garden.

1. As far back as the 15th century, Marigold was thought to be a remedy for a number of medical problems including headache, jaundice, red eyes, toothache, bee sting, sprains, wounds, and ague (chills and fever). However, it was noted by Stevens in *Countrie Farm* that, "It must be taken only when the moon is in the Sign of the Virgin and not when Jupiter is in the ascendant, for then the herb loses its virtue."
2. Some folks still believe that teas and broths made from dried marigold flowers "comfort the heart and spirit".
3. Botanist and physician Nicholas Culpepper (1616-1654) wrote, "The juice of Marigold leaves mixed with vinegar and any hot swelling bathed with it instantly gives ease and assuages it."
4. Early Anglo-Saxons called the Marigold "Golds" or "Ruddes" and boiled the flowers to extract their yellow color. Among its many culinary uses the marigold flower was dried, ground, and then used to add a yellow saffron-like color to soups, stews, and poultry.
5. Also used for a culinary dye in butters and custards, our ancestors also used the flowers to tint cheeses with a rich golden hue.

6. Farmers who mixed marigold petals with their chicken feed observed added intensity to the yellow of their egg yolks.
7. Eleanour Sinclair Rohde notes the marigold flower's use as a hair dye in *Old English Herbals*, "Of marygold we learn that Summe use to make theyr here yelow with the floure of this herbe, not beyng contet with the naturall colour which God hath geven them."

## The Tagetes – African (*T. erecta*), French (*T. patula*), and Mule Marigolds

### **African Marigolds**

The tallest of the marigolds, the African marigold lives up to its name in height. This giant cultivar often stretches up to three feet tall. The flowers of these giants may measure up to full half-foot in diameter. However, the name "African" is deceptive since, like all *Tagetes*, the African marigold originated in Latin America.

You may also find the African marigold sold under either the *American Marigold* or the *Crackerjack Marigold*.

The African marigold is a beneficial companion plant in the garden, attracting bees and butterflies while repelling many harmful nematodes. The strong scent of the flowers is also an effective repellent for small animals— rabbits, squirrels, cats, and dogs— that commonly wreak havoc in a vegetable garden.



Because of its origination in desert-like areas, the African marigold has an inherited drought tolerance and does best when planted in a sunny location. Yet during hot, dry spells, spider mites and grasshoppers may attack the African marigold.

Beginning in mid-summer and lasting until the first frost, full double blooms in bold Aztec yellows and oranges are a hallmark of the African marigold.

Sow African marigold seed directly outdoors when all danger of frost is past or start them 6 weeks prior to the last frost date in your area.

Plants for transplanting are also available from most nurseries and other retail plant outlets.

Give these large marigolds plenty of room to grow, spacing them up to 18 inches apart. Once grown, it's also a good idea to attach their stems to garden stakes to protect them from storm damage.

Deadheading spent flowers encourages the African marigold to continue blooming through the summer.

The African marigold has become so popular that hundreds of hybrids have been cultivated for use in both vegetable and herb gardens as well as flowerbeds. The characteristic pungent aroma of the African marigold is muted when hybrids with the French marigold.

### **French Marigolds**

French marigolds are notable for their "quieter" aroma. The French marigold is a demure annual flower that reaches just six to twelve inches in stature.

Taking advantage of their vigorous growth and drought tolerance the African marigold is often hybrid with the French marigold, which has a longer and more prolific blooming season. These hybrids are called triploid marigolds and probably because they're sterile are commonly referred to as "mule marigolds."

All types of Marigold, except for triploid hybrids, easily grow from seed and in fact, if left to themselves will often scatter their seeds in August and September, reseeding their area for next season's crop of bright and colorful bloom.

## Planting Marigolds

All true marigolds make excellent bedding plants. Each spring, nursery and garden centers are full of marigold transplants for those who just can't wait to see the vibrant blooms of their orange and yellow flowers. However, avid gardeners with large gardens or several areas to plant and those who grow the marigold to harvest for culinary or herbal remedy use easily start their marigolds inexpensively from seed.

Marigold seeds are definitely among those that will bloom where they are planted. In addition to being both tolerant of sun and part shade, the marigold isn't fussy about soil composition and grows in just about any spot in your garden. A packet or two of marigold seeds produces more than enough plants to border even a large garden.

Either start marigold seeds indoors about six weeks before you expect the last frost or sow them directly into your garden when danger of frost is past. You can expect the seeds to germinate in ten to fourteen days when started at temperatures at 60 to 75F.

Most marigold seeds are so hardy that you can sow them all through the summer for different bloom times or even in the fall for blooms in early spring! If kept moist, seeds germinate in as little as three to five days when temperatures reach 75 to 80F. In addition, many marigold cultivars reseed themselves. Extra seeds are also easy to store. Simply put them into an airtight container, keep them cool and dry, and they will last for several seasons.

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