

Marigolds (*Tagetes*)

Inch worm, inch worm
Measuring the marigolds
Could it be, stop and see
How beautiful they are

Written by Frank Loesser



Marigolds are originally from Mexico. They are brightly colored annuals that come in a variety of solid and multi-colored hues of yellow, gold, orange and red. They thrive in the full sun and heat of summer. The plants are a lazy gardener's delight – no deadheading required. The newer flowers are going to grow taller and cover the spent blooms. The thrifty gardener picks these dried blooms and stores the seeds for next year.

Marigolds flower 45 to 50 days after being planted. Start seeds indoors in late March or early April for planting soon after the last frost. Leggy plants aren't a problem. When you transplant into the garden, the leggy stem will fall over, grow roots and send up more stems and flowers. The seeds can also be planted directly into the garden after all danger of frost is past. If you buy marigolds, check to be sure that they aren't root bound and choose those that haven't bloomed. If they are root bound, gently tear the roots apart. If they have blooms, pick them off so the plant can expend all its efforts into growing healthy roots.

To keep things simple, let's divide marigolds into four basic species: African marigolds, French marigolds, Triploids-a hybrid, and single marigolds.

African marigolds (*T. erecta*)

Large flowered African marigolds are erect compact plants that can reach 12 to 14 inches in height. The flowers are approximately 3 1/2 inches across and the plant blooms 2 to 3 weeks earlier than tall varieties. There are no bi-colors in this group. The colors range from primrose yellow to pumpkin orange.

The tall flowered African marigolds can reach heights of 4 feet or more and spread as wide. The yellow and orange flowers bloom in late summer. The plants should be spaced at least a foot apart and staked or enclosed with wires. They are used primarily for cut flowers.

French marigolds (*T. patula*)

Large flowered French marigolds reach 12 to 16 inches in height. The 2 inch flowers can be doubled, single daisy-like or super-crested. Dwarf French marigolds have small 1-1 1/2-inch flowers on plants that grow to 12 inches. The blooms can be crested, tufted, button or single. The colors can be solid or bi-colored in shades of reddish brown, yellow and orange. During the 'dog days' of summer, flowering lessens with this species.

Triploids (Triploid group)

The Triploids hybrids are a cross between the French and African marigolds. They reach 12 to 16 inches with single or double 2 1/2 inch flowers in shades of yellow and orange. They can also be bi-colored. The 'dog days' of summer don't stop these marigolds from profuse flowering all summer long.

Signet marigolds (Signet Group)

Signet marigolds have simple 1-inch daisy-like blooms, long stems in shades of yellow or orange.

Marigolds have been in our gardens for ages and are the basis for the following myth:

Midas was such a greedy king that one day he prayed that everything he touched would be turned to gold. According to this well-known Greek myth, his wish was granted and soon everything he touched was turned to gold- including his own daughter whom he had joyously embraced in celebration of his new-found power. Luckily for Midas, his new-found power was reversed and all returned to normal; all except one little flower. The marigold remained brilliantly gold as a reminder of the evils of greed.

So goes the story of Midas and the marigold. But the myths regarding marigolds remain. Named for the god Tages, the marigold's common name comes from the early practice of offering it in place of coins at Marian altars – hence the name 'Mary's gold'.

Another folk belief states that planting marigolds in the vegetable garden will repel insects. Some research shows marigolds have more effects on certain soil-dwelling nematode populations. Some species of marigolds release compounds from their roots which can be toxic to some of the microscopic worm-like organisms that destroy the root systems of plants. This seems to occur only if you plant a solid, dense area of marigolds and allow them to grow for about two months. They are then chopped down and the roots and cuttings turned under (best in the fall). Visible results can take up to four months to appear if the right combination of marigold and nematode species are used. The trick is to find the right combination.

For sheer exuberance, plant some marigolds in your garden this year. They range from tiny petite specimens to large stately shrub like plants. All of them will be covered in spectacular blooms from summer to first frost. And, they will bring gold to your garden.

References

Brickell, Christopher, and Judith D. Zuk. *The American Horticultural Society A-Z Encyclopedia of Garden Plants*. New York, NY: DK Publishing