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The Marigold: Easy-to-grow, Colorful, a Timeless Beauty!

Is there a flower more varied and easy-going than the marigold? Honored no fewer than 50 times with All America Selections awards, from the ‘Guinea Gold’ African marigold (*Tagetes erecta*) in 1933 to ‘Moonsong Deep Orange’, a *T. erecta* hybrid, in 2010, this versatile bedding flower is as dependable as it is popular.

It’s interesting to note that “African” marigold is not from Africa, nor is “French” marigold from France. Both types hail from the Americas, from Argentina north to New Mexico and Arizona. For the full story of the marigold’s world travels, visit the National Garden Bureau’s “Year of the Marigolds” history at www.ngb.org.



Tagetes patula, a.k.a. “French” marigolds, thrive in the heat of summer.



Left to Right: *Tagetes erecta* ‘Moonsong Deep Orange’ (AAS), *T. patula* ‘Jaguar’, *T. erecta* x *T. patula* ‘Zenith’ series, *T. tenuifolia* ‘Lemon Gem’.

Dozens of marigolds are available to the home gardener, with more being introduced each year. The marigolds that are the easiest to grow from seed fall into several categories:

***Tagetes erecta*, or “African” marigolds**

More appropriately called the Mexican or Aztec marigold, *T. erecta* is indigenous to Mexico and Guatemala, and is known for its big, pompom flowerheads, which are often more than 3 inches in diameter. The plants themselves can be as petite as 10 inches, or as tall as 4 feet. Dwarf varieties, such as ‘Antigua Mix’ and ‘Taishan Yellow’ (pictured), grow no taller than 1 foot, and are good choices for containers. Semi-dwarf varieties grow up to 2 feet in height. There are plenty of these mid-sized landscape-friendly selections to choose from; AAS winner ‘Moonsong Deep Orange’ is in this category, as are the popular ‘Inca II’ and ‘Moonstruck’ series.



If full-scale exuberance is your style, options are more limited. ‘Crackerjack Mix’, an heirloom variety with a mix of yellow and orange flowers, grows to 3 feet tall. Towering ‘Lofty Lady’ has enormous yellow flowers; and ‘Flagstaff’, with brilliant orange blooms, may grow as tall as 4 feet!

***Tagetes patula*, or “French” marigolds**

Less flashy and smaller-bloomed than *T. erecta*, but no less adaptable, the marigold commonly known as French marigold is known for its mounds of yellow to red, often bi-colored, flowers. The plants generally grow wider than they are tall. Flowers are single to double, and often crested, but they never become as full as *T. erecta* flowers. Most French marigolds fall into the dwarf, that is, 12-inch or smaller, category, although there are a few semi-dwarf and full-sized varieties. ‘Naughty Marietta’, a 1947 AAS winner that is still a favorite among gardeners almost 70 years after its introduction, grows to 16 inches, as does ‘Fireball’. Dwarf varieties include ‘Lemon Drop’ (only 8 inches tall), ‘Mr. Majestic’ (pictured), popular ‘Durango’, ‘Bonanza’, and ‘Janie’ series, and many more.



Marigold roots produce a compound that has been found to be effective in protecting crops against root-knot nematode damage, especially if the marigold plant residue is tilled into the soil at the end of the growing season. A variety sold as ‘Nema-gone’ is promoted specifically for this purpose. Gardeners report that it grows to 4 feet in height or even taller.



‘Summer Splash’ marigold looks like a French marigold (*T. patula*), but what distinguishes it is its heat tolerance. It blooms profusely over the entire summer.

Hybrids of the two

Hybrids of *T. erecta* x *T. patula* combine the impressive flowers of the one species with the more compact size of the other. As a result of the cross, the vigorous plants are unable to produce seed, which is a good thing for your landscape. It means they can put their resources into making more flowers over a longer period. These interspecific hybrids (crosses between two species) have been around for decades and are great garden performers but they remain less prevalent than the two species they are derived from. Seed germination may be slower and, because the plants are sterile, gardeners don’t have the option of saving seed for next year. Among choices available to gardeners are the 12- to 15-inch ‘Zenith’ series, available in reds, yellows, and oranges, and ‘Summer Splash’, a bushy yellow marigold that grows to 18 inches.

***Tagetes tenuifolia* (syn, *T. signata*), or signet marigolds**

They don't smell like marigolds, and their 10- to 12-inch tall and wide lacy foliage doesn't look much like marigold foliage, but the dainty plants known as a signet marigolds are as adaptable and companionable as their better-known relatives. The ferny leaves have a citrusy scent, and the flowers, though a scant half-inch in diameter, make up in numbers what they lack in girth. The petals are edible, and make a pretty addition to salads or cooked rice. Seeds of 'Lemon Gem', 'Red Gem', and 'Tangerine Gem' are widely available; 'Starfire' (pictured) is an heirloom favorite.



***Tagetes lucida*, or Mexican mint marigold**

Mexican mint marigold is technically a perennial (hardy in zones 9 and above), although in much of the country it is grown as an annual. Late in the summer it produces many single, yellow marigold-like blooms. Unlike other marigolds it is not used as a bedding plant; several of its common names—Texas tarragon, Mexican tarragon, false tarragon—hint at its usefulness in the kitchen.



photo by Larry McDaniel



photo by Bob Dunlop, Gustavus College Linnaeus Arboretum

Marigolds for Butterflies

The Los Angeles Butterfly Survey lists marigold as a “crowd pleaser,” that is, a flower that provides nectar for many different species of butterflies. The types of butterflies that have been observed sipping nectar from marigolds include Clouded and Orange Sulphurs, Whites, Skippers, Red Admirals (pictured right), Diana Fritillaries (pictured left), and Pearl Crescents.

In general, the closer a plant is in form to its wild relatives, the more useful it is as a pollinator plant. Therefore the single-flowered *Tagetes patula*, the signet marigolds, and Mexican mint marigold are the best choices for butterfly gardening.