

# *Flor de muerto*

By Amy Lew



Did you ever wonder why marigolds are such a prominent part of the Day of the Dead alters? The marigold, or **Cempasúchil** (Pronunciation: sem-pa-soo-cheel) is known as the *flor de muerto* or flower of the dead in Mexico. Although the Spanish would like to lay claim to the discovery of this illustrious plant, it has been utilized since Pre-Columbian times. The word "Cempasúchitl" comes from the Nahuatl (the language spoken by the Aztecs) and means twenty-flower: Cempoa, meaning "twenty" and xochitl, "flower" and refers to the many petals of the flower.

Several South American cultures have used marigolds as a cure for stomach aches, parasites, liver illnesses, vomiting, and toothaches among other illnesses. The flowers are still used in many areas to treat these and other ailments. Treatment options include wearing the flowers in a pouch around the neck, eating them, or making a tea. It is known the Aztecs gathered the wild plant, as well as cultivated it for medicinal, ceremonial, and decorative purposes. Marigolds have been globally cultivated and hybridized for use in decorative gardens in contemporary times.

The folklore surrounding Cempasúchitl is enchanting. Domesticated by inhabitants of Mexico and Guatemala, long before conquistadors brought the seeds to Europe, marigolds were death flowers. The Aztecs used them in rituals of human sacrifice. Mayan descendants, living in the mountains of Guatemala, left trails of marigold petals from the graveyard to their houses. Although the flowers are attractive, the leaf glands give marigold plants a disagreeable, (perhaps charnel-like) smell. Seeds sprout quickly and easily in sunny, plowed beds.

There are at least fifty wild species of marigolds native to the subtropical-tropical Americas and Africa. In addition to medicinal uses, traditional cultures use various species as sources of yellow

dyes and pesticides. Growing marigolds between rows of potatoes may protect root vegetables from attacks by eelworms (nematodes), and they are part of one of several different companion planting systems known as the three sisters utilized by many societies throughout the world.

The modern botanical name, *Tagetes erecta*, was given to the plant by Carolus Linnaeus. He is considered the 'father of taxonomy' because in the 1700s he developed a way to name and organize species. Obviously, Linnaeus did not want to attempt to Latinize the tongue-twisting names of the Mexican deities like Xochiquetzal, the goddess of flowers (represented by the marigold) or the Aztec goddess of death, Mictecacihuatl which is more than a mouthful. Mictecacihuatl apparently had a weakness for flowers and the brilliant yellow cempasúchil were sacred to her. The obscure Etruscan underworld god Tages would have to do.

*Flor de muerto*, a flower for the living and the dead.

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