

During Día de los Muertos, marigolds are used to decorate altars and graves and to make paths of petals. Their bright color and scent are traditionally thought to help guide the spirits of loved ones home.

Flowers that help guide the way

Día de los Muertos, or Day of the Dead, is a time to remember people who have died. Many families prepare an ofrenda, an altar with photographs, food, candles and other items connected to those they are honoring.

Marigolds bring vivid orange and yellow to these displays. In Mexico, the flower is often called cempasúchil, a name derived from Nahuatl. Its color and distinctive scent are associated with guiding returning spirits toward the ofrenda.

The flowers can also make a place of remembrance feel welcoming. An altar may be carefully arranged or built from what a family has on hand. Either way, the marigolds are there to be noticed.

Where families place marigolds

There is no single arrangement that every family follows. Marigolds may be used fresh, as whole flowers or loose petals, depending on the space and the traditions being observed.

- **On an ofrenda:** Blooms may sit in vases or be tucked around photographs and offerings.
- **On graves:** Families may bring flowers to a cemetery and place them at a loved one's grave.
- **Along a path:** Petals can be scattered from an entrance toward an altar as a symbolic guide.
- **In decorations:** Whole flowers may be strung into garlands or arranged around an altar.

At a cemetery, flowers can be part of a visit that includes cleaning and decorating the grave. The details vary by family and community, as do the foods, music and other offerings that accompany them.

Using marigolds on an ofrenda

If you are making an ofrenda, start with a place for the photograph of the person you want to remember. Add items that have meaning to you and your family. A favorite food, a glass of water and candles are common offerings.

Put fresh marigolds in a vase or arrange a few blooms around the display. You can also scatter petals in front of it. There is no need to cover every surface, unless you are especially fond of sweeping up petals later.

Keep flowers away from candle flames, and use a stable container for water. If fresh marigolds are hard to find, paper flowers can add color to a display, though they will not have the scent of fresh blooms.

Common questions about marigolds

Are marigolds the only flowers used for Día de los Muertos?

No. Other flowers may be used too, and choices vary by place and family. Marigolds are especially recognizable because of their strong color and association with guiding spirits.

Do the petals have to form a path?

No. A petal path is one tradition, not a requirement. Flowers in a vase or on a grave can also be part of a family's remembrance.

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