

Marigolds

A Few Stray Petals

*This riddle, Cuddy, if thou canst explain . . .
What flower is it which bears the Virgin's name,
The richest metal added to the same?*

John Gay. Pastoral

I was fascinated by the articles on the marigold emblem in the *Research Journals* 1, 2, and 4, written by the editor, Mike Frohnsdorff, and Sandra Lauder respectively, and I hope it is not inappropriate to add a few further observations on the plant itself and its properties.

Of others take a sheaf, of me a grain.

Anon / Dowland

There's something for everybody in the marigold! Culpeper calls it "an herb of the sun, and under Leo". He goes on to extol its virtues culinary and medicinal:

They strengthen the heart exceedingly and are very expulsive . . . The juice of marigold leaves mixed with vinegar, and any hot swelling bathed with it, instantly gives ease . . . The flowers, either green or dried, are much used in possets, broths, and drink, as a comforter of the heart . . .

The Jamies and Nigellas amongst you will already know how the petals can give a delightful tang to salads and be used as a saffron substitute to colour cheese, rice dishes, and cakes. They can also enhance fish, venison, and chicken broth.

Are you a keen gardener? Here are a few tips! Aromas and excretions from marigold roots are invaluable to other plants. They kill nematodes in soil and whitefly, and are especially beneficial to grow with potatoes and tomatoes. Marigolds in general and the Mexican variety in particular (*Tagetes minuta*) are said to control celandine, ground ivy, horsetail, couch grass, bindweed, and ground elder. Wow! A gardener's friend indeed!

While in botanical mode, let's look at some definitions. The term 'marigold' can be applied to four species: *Caltha palustris*, the marsh marigold; *Calendula officinalis*, the common marigold; *Chrysanthemum segetum*, the corn marigold; and *Tagetes minuta*, the African, French, or Mexican marigold.

According to the *RHS Dictionary of Gardening*, *Calendula* derives its name from the Latin *calendae*, the first day of the month, on which interest is paid, in reference to the long period of bloom. *Tagetes* is from Tages, an Etruscan deity, grandson of Jupiter, said to have taught the Etruscans soothsaying. Well, well!

Calendula has long been used for medical purposes: the Romans used the juice from fresh flowers as a cure for warts; by the Doctrine of Signatures it was used in the treatment of jaundice and as a substitute for saffron in the treatment of measles and smallpox. (Culpeper mentions this too.) It was used as a styptic by the settlers in North America and, during the American Civil War and in World War I, as a haemostatic.

It is alleged that looking at a marigold is beneficial for the eyes, and an old herbal reports that this will also “drive evil humour out off [*sic*] the head.” Even modern writers point out the good healing and antiseptic qualities of the petals when put in oils and ointments and used in the treatment of wounds and scars.

Have you ambitions as an alchemist? In the 1664 posthumous edition of Dodoen’s herbal we are told that alchemists used marigolds in their endeavours to make gold. [Translation] “The alchemists, strange minds and thorough investigators of the secrets of nature, regard marigolds as being special and say they are useful in the making of gold, its seeds in particular, which resemble birds’ talons”. Unfortunately I do not have the precise recipe. Do you?

The marigold is well represented in poetry and song. A priest, writing in praise of Queen Mary Tudor, wrote *A New Ballade of the Marigolde*, opening thus:

*The God above, for man’s delight
Hath heere ordaynde every thing,
Sonne, Moone and sterres shynyng so bright,*

.....

*Amonges all which that I beholde
(As to my minde best contentyng),
I doo commende the Marigolde.*

The song *Mark how the blushful morn in vain* (Carew/Lanier) advises a shy would-be lover to emulate the ‘planet of the day’ with his powerful ray when courting “the am’rous marigold” so that she will receive “his warmer beams into her virgin leaves”!

Staying with the virgin theme, let’s take a look at the well-known folk-song *Blow away the morning dew*. A young girl, through cunning, escapes her would-be seducer:

*But when they came to her father’s gate,
So nimble she popped in;
And said: There is a fool without
And here’s a maid within.*

She even has the cheek to taunt him further:

*We have a flower in our garden,
We call it marigold:*

*And if you will not when you may,
You shall not when you wolde.
And sing blow away the morning dew, etc.*

The marigold was sometimes used in May Day festivities. Chaucer links marigolds and May in his poem *The Court of Love*.

*Forth go all the court, both most and least,
To fetch floures fresh, and braunch and bloom*

.....

*Eke at each other throw the floures bright,
The primerose, the violete, and the gold.*

Quoted from W Chappell Popular Music of the Olden Time.

In Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, marigolds are mentioned several times, including references to May Day celebrations. At Sevenoaks in Kent the children would carry boughs and garlands covered with blue and yellow flowers. Other places in England are cited as having similar festivities, sometimes specifying the use of marsh marigolds, primroses, or bluebells. The garlands were generally in the form of hoops intersecting each other at right angles. A hoop wreathed with rowan and marsh marigold, and bearing suspended within it two balls, was, in Frazer's time, still carried on May Day by villagers in some parts of Ireland. The balls, which were sometimes covered with gold and silver paper, were said to have originally represented the sun and moon.

Some sources link the marigold with autumn and death, indeed the calendula is sometimes claimed to be the special flower for October.

In Europe, marigolds feature in the All Saints and All Souls celebrations. Saffron is usually used to colour the soul-cakes, and marigold can be used as a substitute. In parts of Europe the marigolds were made into garlands along with other late-blooming flowers and twined about tombstones.

The *RHS Dictionary of Gardening* under *Calendula* states: In Mexico at the time of the conquistadors it was known as the "flower of death," springing up like poppies in profusion on ground disturbed by warfare.

According to the *Compendium of symbolic and ritual plants in Europe* (de Cleene and Lejeune) "in Mexico it is said that marigolds flower where the Mexican soldiers who fought against the Spanish conquistadors spilled their blood . . . The reddish brown patches on the petals are 'blood'."

In the *Encyclopedia of religious rites, rituals, and Festivals*, we read that yellow symbolised death among the prehispanic people therefore marigolds are profuse at the Day of the Dead celebration. In the same regions of Mexico the orange-yellow flowers and petals line pathways between cemetery and houses so that the dead can find their way home to their tables of offerings and to their loved ones.

Would Marlowe have known of these New World rites? According to the Baines Note he seems to have been aware of the sacred significance of the tobacco pipe.

Now for a more romantic note! In England the marigold was used in the same way as a daisy to predict whether s/he “loves me” or “loves me not”.

According to a 16th century German belief men should carry with them at all times a marigold root and a violet silk handkerchief in order to be popular with the girls! You never know, it might be worth a try! German peasant girls would sow marigolds in the footsteps of those they wished to embrace. That might be worth a try too but make sure you get the right footprints otherwise a Midsummer Night’s Nightmare may ensue.

Various sources refer to the fact that the Slavs used marigolds in love spells. Here is Frazer again: “Among the South Slavs a girl will dig up the earth from the footprints of a man she loves and put them in a flowerpot. Then she plants in the pot a marigold, a flower that is thought to be fadeless. And as its golden blossom grows and never fades, so shall her sweetheart’s love grow and bloom, and never, never fade.”

The marigold features - or is sometimes deemed to feature - in old myths.

Girls, beware of falling in love with Apollo! A Nereid, Clytië, did just that and, when the sun god renounced her love for that of Leucothoë, Clytië informed the girl’s father. To punish her Apollo turned the Nereid into a ‘sunflower’, which in some sources is construed as a marigold, and she was doomed to gaze upon him for ever. Furthermore, a Greek girl, Calthia, fell in love with Apollo and, because she constantly looked at the sun, she pined away and finally changed into a calendula. So be warned, and always remember your sunglasses, a hat, and factor 50 or it might happen to you ...

There are several other myths where ‘sunflower’ is sometimes interpreted as a marigold, but too many to list here. Also too numerous to cite here are the various symbolic qualities ascribed to this little flower. But which of the marigold’s attributes are fitting for our poet?

There seem to be certain recurring themes: sun/moon; day/night; spring life/autumn death/returning to loved one via a path of petals; open and closed petals, re-opening with the sun; unfading, faithful love; May/October. If Marlowe did survive the Deptford incident, the choice of flower seems uncannily prophetic!

Well, good luck with the gardening anyway and let me know if you come across the recipe for making gold.

Though all my wares be trash, the heart is true. **(Anon / Dowland again!)**

Eileen Vasey - Richmond, Surrey