

ANNUAL GOLD IN THE GARDEN

By Ralph E. Mitchell

If you want to plant an annual flower that just about anybody can succeed with, try marigolds. Marigolds come in a wide range of colors from the favorite shades of orange, yellow and golden-colored, to bi-colored and ivory white. Used as a bedding plant or a cut flower, and even as a dried flower, *Tagetes erecta* and *Tagetes patula*, American and French marigolds respectively, are good choices for the home landscape.

Marigolds are native to subtropical America and have been grown in Mexico for over two millennia. As hinted at above, there are generally two basic types of marigolds, American, sometimes called African, with large flowers and tall plants, and French which are small-flowered, dwarf plants. There is also one lesser known type called the signet marigold which has very small flowers and leaves. American marigolds can grow up to three tall and one foot wide and have flowers several inches across. This characteristic tallness also makes them susceptible to falling over in windy and rainy weather. French marigolds are much smaller than American and are often called dwarf marigolds. These plants are generally a foot or less tall and less than a foot in width with flowers generally an inch or less wide.

Marigold seeds are easily germinated in a week or less and started plants are almost always available at local garden centers. Set the plants in the garden at the same level they were in the pot or even a little deeper at intervals of twelve to eighteen inches apart. All marigolds prefer a full sun area of at least six hours of sun per day.

Fall is a good time of year for marigolds as the climate cools down a bit and moisture and humidity decrease.

While the marigold is an easy plant to grow, even for those without green thumbs, there are a few pests to look out for. Mites, tiny spider-like creatures, feed on the leaves especially during hot, dry weather causing the foliage to lose color. Fine webbing may also be noticed. Leaf tier caterpillars may also roll up leaves as they feed on the inside. Slugs may even feed on marigolds at night leaving their silvery slime trail in the morning. Call our office at 764-4340 for particulars on control options.

There are also several diseases that may afflict marigolds. Personally, I have encountered a situation where the stems of my marigolds turned brown and rotted at the soil level. This wilt and stem rot disease is best controlled by removing and destroying affected plants. Sometimes rotation of a flower crop with a totally unrelated type may also help disrupt a build-up of certain disease issues. Making sure that enough space is provided between plants for good air circulation will also help plants dry out quicker thus reducing the chance of disease outbreaks. General plant sanitation by removing all old plant parts and perhaps improving drainage can also help. In wet weather, botrytis blight may cause flowers to turn brown and die prematurely. A gray mold may form on older, fading flowers as well. Removing the infected flowers will help control this disease.

As far as selecting a variety to grow I would recommend trying all of them! There is a virtual universe of cultivars available locally or through seed catalogs. While I tend to grow dwarf French marigolds, I have also

grown a larger white variety and even a brightly striped cultivar. In time, you will discover a variety or two that you really like!

For more information on all types of annual bedding plants, please contact our Master Gardeners on the Plant Lifeline at 941.764.4340 from 1:00pm-4:00pm Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Our office is located at 25550 Harbor View Road, Suite 3, in Port Charlotte. Our **Plant Clinics** are available across the county:

- **Englewood/Charlotte Public Library** 10:00am-1:00pm every Thursday.
- **Demonstration Garden** (6900 Florida Street, PG) every Thursday 9:00am-11:00am.
- **Mid-County Regional Library** 1st and 3rd Thursday of month 1:00pm-3:00pm.
- **Edison College Learning Resources Library** 3rd Tuesday of month 1:00pm-4:00pm.

Monthly **Plant Clinics** are Saturdays 9:00am-12:00pm at the following locations:

- **Englewood/Charlotte Public Library** 1st Saturday of month.
- **Peachland Promenades Publix** - 2nd Saturday of month.
- **Home Depot Murdock & Home Depot Punta Gorda** - 3rd Saturday of month.

Ralph Mitchell is the County Extension Director/Horticulture Agent for the Charlotte County Cooperative Extension Service. You may contact him by email (Ralph.Mitchell@charlottefl.com). You may also contact a volunteer Master Gardener 1:00pm-4:00pm Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 941.764.4340 or by email (Master.Gardener@charlottefl.com).

For more information about our Florida Yards and Neighborhoods Program, please contact our FYN Horticulture Program Assistant, Allison Steele, at 941.764.4340. Allison can help educate you about the Florida Yards & Neighborhoods Program so that you can create a beautiful, Florida-Friendly landscape that saves you time and money while conserving precious water resources and reducing pollution.

Resource:

Gilman, E. F. & Howe, T. (1999) Tagetes erecta. The University of Florida Extension Service, IFAS.

Gilman, E. F. (1999) Tagetes erecta Perfection Yellow. The University of Florida Extension Service, IFAS.

Gilman, E. F. (1999) Tagetes patula.