

Marigolds, especially the Mexican flower called cempasúchil, are the blooms most linked to Day of the Dead altars. Families may also choose cockscomb, baby's breath, white flowers or blooms that mattered to the person being remembered.

The role of marigolds

Cempasúchil flowers have large, rounded heads in shades of orange or yellow, along with a strong scent. During Día de Muertos, families place them on ofrendas, or altars, and on graves to honor people who have died.

Some traditions use the flower's scent and bright color to guide the spirits of the dead back to their families. Petals may be spread along a route that leads toward the altar.

There are several ways to arrange the flowers. A family might stand whole stems in vases, or remove the petals and use them to make a path, border or pattern around the offerings. Either method brings the marigold's vivid color into the display.

Flowers that can accompany marigolds

Marigolds are a familiar choice, but ofrendas can include many kinds of flowers. These are among the blooms that may be arranged beside them:

- **Cockscomb:** Also called terciopelo in Spanish, it has compact, velvety heads that may be deep red or magenta.
- **Baby's breath:** Its small white blooms can fill open spaces around larger flowers.
- **Gladioli:** Their tall stems carry flowers along their length, adding height to an altar or a grave arrangement.

- **Chrysanthemums:** In some places, these are offered in memory of the dead. Their full flower heads bring additional color.

Flower customs differ among regions of Mexico and among families in other places. A family may also include a flower loved by the person they are remembering.

Ways to place flowers on an altar

Set flowers in containers on the altar, arrange them around photographs or place them at the base. Loose petals can be scattered on the ground or used to trace a cross or another shape.

An ofrenda usually includes more than flowers. Photographs, candles, food and drinks may also have a place, so leave enough room for the items your family plans to display. Keep flowers and foliage clear of candle flames.

Picking blooms for an ofrenda

To follow the best known flower tradition, begin with cempasúchil. Its orange or yellow blooms can form a clear focal point, including in a small arrangement.

Add cockscomb or white flowers if they are available and have meaning for your family. Fresh blooms are common, but paper flowers can decorate an altar too. Your choices can reflect local customs as well as the person being remembered.

Common questions about ofrenda flowers

Do all altars need marigolds?

No. Marigolds are closely associated with the holiday, but families create ofrendas in different ways.

What is the meaning of cempasúchil?

The word comes from Nahuatl and is commonly translated as “flower of twenty petals.”

Is it appropriate to use someone’s favorite flower?

Yes. An ofrenda is a place to remember someone, and a favorite bloom can serve as a personal offering.

Can flowers go on a grave?

Yes. Families may place flowers on graves as well as arranging them on altars at home.

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