

Marigolds, especially the Mexican marigold known as cempasúchil, are the flowers most closely associated with Day of the Dead altars. Cockscomb, baby's breath and white flowers are also used, with choices varying by family and region.

Why marigolds are important

Cempasúchil has full orange or yellow flower heads and a strong scent. During Día de Muertos, the flowers are placed on altars, called ofrendas, and on graves to honor people who have died.

Marigold petals are sometimes scattered in a path leading toward an altar. The color and scent are traditionally understood to help guide the spirits of the dead back to their families.

Some families use whole stems in vases. Others pull off the petals to make a border, a path or a design around the offerings. Both approaches put the flower's vivid color at the center of the display.

Other flowers used on altars

Marigolds are prominent, but they are not the only flowers found on an ofrenda. These blooms may appear alongside them:

- **Cockscomb:** Its dense, velvety flower heads can be deep red or magenta. It is also known in Spanish as terciopelo.
- **Baby's breath:** Its small white flowers are often used to fill spaces between larger blooms.
- **Gladioli:** Tall stems with flowers along their length can add height to an altar or grave arrangement.

- **Chrysanthemums:** These flowers are used in some places as offerings for the dead and can add full heads of color.

Flower traditions are not identical across Mexico or among families elsewhere. An altar can also include a flower that the person being remembered loved.

How flowers are arranged

Flowers may be set in containers on the altar, placed around photographs or laid at the base. Petals can be scattered on the ground or used to outline a cross or another shape.

An ofrenda often holds more than flowers. Photographs, candles, food and drinks can share the space, so leave room for the items your family wants to include. Keep flowers and foliage away from candle flames.

Choosing flowers for an ofrenda

If you want to follow the best known floral tradition, start with cempasúchil. Its orange or yellow blooms make a clear focal point, even in a small arrangement.

Add cockscomb or white flowers if they are available and meaningful to you. Fresh flowers are common, but paper flowers can also decorate an altar. The choice of flowers can reflect both local custom and the person being remembered.

Questions about altar flowers

Are marigolds required?

No. They are strongly associated with the holiday, but families make ofrendas in different ways.

What does cempasúchil mean?

The name comes from Nahuatl and is commonly translated as flower of twenty petals.

Can I use a person's favorite flowers?

Yes. An ofrenda is a place to remember someone, and a favorite flower can be a personal offering.

Can flowers be placed on a grave?

Yes. Families may decorate graves with flowers as well as placing them on home altars.

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