



# Guide to Growing Marigolds

Composited by Gareth Richards

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## When and How to Plant Marigold Seeds

Ah, the pungent smell of marigolds – their distinctive fragrance tells me that summer has most definitely arrived.

And once summer is at full tilt, I love seeing their happy yellow, orange, and red flowers brightening up my garden.

If you're a fan of marigolds too, you probably purchase a flat or two every year to add to your own vegetable garden, or arrange in your flower beds or planters.

But once you cross the line from fan to fanatic like I have, you may want to start growing these annuals from seed.

This opens up your options to enjoy exciting new cultivars, and saves quite a bit of money in your gardening budget, to boot.

Deciding whether to sow your marigolds directly in the garden or start them indoors will require you to take a few factors into consideration: the length of your growing season, the type of cultivar you're planting, and how impatient you are for these annuals to fill your garden with flowers.

I'll go over each of these different factors, so you can decide which method will work best for you.



The three main species of marigolds found in US gardens are the Mexican (sometimes called African) marigold, *Tagetes erecta*, the French *T. patula*, and the signet marigold, *T. tenuifolia*.

Another member of the Asteraceae family, *Calendula officinalis* is known as the pot or English marigold.

In this guide, I'll go over how to start the three *Tagetes* species from seed.

## Why Sow Outdoors

Sowing seeds outdoors is more straightforward than starting them indoors. There are fewer steps involved, fewer materials required, and you avoid the risk of transplant shock.

On the other hand, if you have had issues with these crops getting hit with early frosts in the past, you are probably like me and many other northern and high elevation gardeners who must deal with the challenges of a short growing season.



Here's a more precise way to find out if you have time to sow these annuals outdoors:

Compare the number of frost-free days in your area with the number of days the plant needs to reach maturity.

If you don't know how many frost-free days you have, you can quickly calculate them with this tool from the National Gardening Association.

Just enter your zip code, and it will tell you the average number for your area.

Now find the days to maturity for your selected variety or cultivar. This information is usually located on the seed packet.

If you can't find this information on your seed packet, French marigolds (*Tagetes patula*) will generally bloom in 50-60 days, while Mexican marigolds (*T. erecta*) need 70-100 days.

Signet marigolds (*T. tenuifolia*) often flower in just 60 days, depending on the variety.



*T. tenuifolia*

Compare your number of frost-free days with the number of days the plant needs to reach maturity.

If your marigold takes 100 days or more to bloom, and your growing season has 190 days total, that means you'll potentially get to enjoy the flowers for about three months. Seems like a good deal to me!



If you'd rather forego an indoor seed starting project, there are some cases where you can get away with sowing marigolds directly into your garden:

If you are growing a faster maturing variety, such as most French (*T. patula*) and signet marigold (*T. tenuifolia*) cultivars.

If you are willing to be patient for flowers to appear.

If you have a long growing season.

Let's talk more about that last point. How do you know if you have a long growing season?

If you are able to successfully grow warm-season crops like tomatoes, squash, eggplant, and peppers without concerns about them being killed by early frosts, you probably have a long growing season in your area.



However, if your growing season only has an average of 104 days (my growing season is closer to this number), you might not get to enjoy the blooms at all if you sow seeds outdoors.

The most you may get are some buds.

So if you have a short growing season, start the slower maturing varieties indoors, and for direct sowing, consider a faster maturing variety.

### When to Sow Outdoors

Marigolds are tender annuals, which means they are not at all cold hardy and will be damaged or killed by frost.

That's why these plants smell like summer – and not spring.



While mature marigolds may be able to tolerate just a tiny amount of frost, young seedlings are generally more sensitive and it's better not to risk exposure to the cold.

If you decide to sow directly into your garden soil, plan on doing this about a week or two after your last average frost date.



That way, once your marigolds germinate, the risk of late frosts will likely already have passed.

### How to Sow Outdoors

When you're ready to sow, first choose a full sun location in your garden.

These annual flowers can tolerate some shade, particularly if your summers are really hot. However, flowers will develop more striking colors if they are planted in full sun.



When considering where to plant your marigolds, be aware that these plants need to grow in soil that drains well.

If you're dealing with heavy clay, mix in some compost to help with drainage. Alternatively, sow your seeds in raised beds.

Before sowing, wet the soil lightly with a gentle spray from the hose. I like to do this several hours before I sow my seeds, so the soil is moist but not soggy at planting time.

Scrape back a little bit of soil to use for covering the seeds. Level out the soil and pat it gently to firm it up.

Pour some seeds into the palm of your dry hand so that you don't accidentally end up dumping the entire contents of your packet onto the soil all in one spot. These seeds are light and airy, and that can be easy to do!



Place groups of 3 or 4 seeds on the prepared soil, spaced 6-12 inches apart, depending on the mature spread of your chosen variety.

You'll need to leave more room between each plant if you are growing larger varieties. In general, you can plant smaller cultivars 6-8 inches apart, and larger ones 10-12 inches apart.

Press seeds lightly into the soil, then cover lightly with the soil you pushed to the side, so that they are buried 1/2 inch deep.

Pat and smooth the soil gently, and water lightly with a watering can, or using the gentle shower setting on your watering wand.

Make sure to water every day until seedlings emerge. Gradually taper off watering so that established plants receive about 1 inch a week.

## Why Start Indoors

Do you think sowing seeds directly in the garden might not be the best option for you?

Here are some reasons why you might want to start your marigolds indoors instead:

If you have a short growing season.

If you want blooms early in the summer.

If your area is prone to late killing frosts in the spring or early summer.

If you are growing a slower maturing variety, such as most *T. erecta* cultivars.

## When to Start Indoors

If you decide to start your seeds indoors, plan to sow them 6-8 weeks before your average last frost date.

Allowing your marigolds 6-8 weeks of growth before setting them out will give them a jump start, and you'll enjoy the blooms earlier than if you were to sow them directly in the garden.



They will be ready to transplant into your garden at the beginning of your local warm season, and the earlier maturing varieties will bloom soon after transplanting them.

### How to Start Indoors

Starting marigold seeds indoors is pretty easy, but it does require a few materials and supplies.

If you've never started your own annuals from seed, you might want to review our complete guide to starting annuals from seed indoors.



Here are a few tips for you to get started:

Use sterilized potting soil or soilless starting mix.

Plant 2-3 seeds per starter tray cell.

When seedlings are about 2 inches tall, thin out all but the strongest plant from each cell.

Water daily with a spray bottle to prevent water logging and alleviate the risk of damping off.

If using the light from a south-facing window instead of grow lights, turn your trays daily to help straighten out seedlings, which will tend to lean toward the light.



Seedlings tend to lean towards the light. Turn your trays daily if you are starting your plants in a sunny window!

About a week before you wish to transplant your seedlings, start hardening them off outdoors to acclimate them to their new growing conditions.

First, place them outside in a shaded location where they are protected from wind.



Over the course of a week, gradually increase their exposure to direct sun and wind by about an hour a day, until they outdoors for the entire day, placed in the location where you intend to plant.

Plant your transplants in a full sun location with well-draining soil, and water them in.

I like to do my transplanting on a cloudy day or in the evening, so the transplants don't have so much heat stress to deal with while they acclimate themselves. This also helps to protect me from the sun too!



Water daily for the first week. Once plants are established, give them a good soak about once a week. Water only at the ground level, and avoid spraying the flowers directly with water to keep your blooms looking fresh instead of soggy and wilted.

### Recommended Marigold Cultivars

I honestly haven't met a marigold I didn't like, but there are some cultivars I'm particularly excited about, and I'd like to share these with you.

All of these recommendations are the faster-maturing French type marigolds, *T. patula*.

You'll enjoy gorgeous blooms early in the season, whether you sow indoors in flats or outdoors in the garden.

## Queen Sophia

'Queen Sophia' is an All-America Selections Winner whose fiery petals are warm and entrancing.

The petals of this French type are dark orange with yellow edges, and its double blooms measure 2 to 3 inches across.



'Queen Sophia'

Plants grow 10-12 inches tall with a spread of about 8 inches.

‘Queen Sophia’ will reach maturity in 60 days.

You’ll find ‘Queen Sophia’ seeds in a selection of package sizes at Eden Brothers.

### Strawberry Blonde

Marigolds are typically limited to shades of yellow, red, and orange – so spotting a unique, pink-colored cultivar such as ‘Strawberry Blonde’ is quite a thrill.

The flowers of this variety start out red, and then transform into a lovely pinkish-yellow hue.



‘Strawberry Blonde’

Plants reach 8-10 inches tall and have a 6 to 8-inch spread at maturity.

‘Strawberry Blonde’ will reach maturity in 55-70 days.

You’ll find ‘Strawberry Blonde’ in packs of 50 seeds for purchase exclusively at Burpee.

## Durango

When you just can’t decide which type of marigold to grow, why not go for a mix?

The ‘Durango’ mix comes in a beautiful mélange of solid yellow, orange, and burgundy hues as well as some enticing bicolor patterns, with double blooms reaching 2 to 2 1/2 inches across.



‘Durango’ Mix

Plants reach 10-12 inches in height and have a 9-inch spread.

Flowers in the 'Durango' mix come to maturity in 50-60 days.

You'll find the 'Durango' mix, and an assortment of other 'Durango' colors, in packs of 1000 seeds at True Leaf Market.

If you want to harvest and save your own seeds for use the following year, you'll want to choose old-fashioned heirloom cultivars rather than newer hybrid types.

### Turn Seed into 'Golds

Considering all the factors – the length of your growing season, your chosen varieties, and how quickly you want to enjoy the blooms – you should have a pretty good idea by now of the best way to turn seed into 'golds.

So, what have you decided, gardener? Will you be sowing outdoors or starting indoors? Or perhaps both? And which wonderful varieties are you growing? Let us know in the comments below.



## How to Use Marigolds for Pest Control

Marigolds have a bit of a reputation in the gardening world. They're known for repelling all manner of pests and diseases, whether they've technically earned these accolades or not.

It's extremely common to see their cheery heads nodding in the summer sunshine next to tomatoes, squash, and broccoli.

But as with many garden practices, is there any science behind those things that we've been doing for years – or sometimes centuries?



When it comes to using these flowers as a form of pest repellent, there's a good reason to be planting those golden beauties next to your edible plants, and scientific research has confirmed it.

Marigolds can help you to control certain pests that may wreak havoc on your veggies.

Keep in mind that it might not be as simple as grabbing a flat of French marigolds and plopping them next to your nearly-mature potatoes.

Using natural methods of pest control can take a little advance planning, so let's jump right in.

### Whiteflies

A 2019 study published in Plos One proves that glasshouse whiteflies (*Trialeurodes vaporariorum*) are repelled by French marigolds, *Tagetes patula*.

Niall Conboy at Newcastle University's School of Biology and Dr. Thomas McDaniel at Newcastle University's School of Natural and Environmental Science looked at whether the humble flower could chase off the nasty whitefly.

It turns out that the limonene in marigolds deters this annoying and destructive pest.

However, that doesn't mean that if you have a whitefly infestation you can just run out and grab a four-pack of flowers. Nope.



You need to be growing marigolds next to whatever plant you want to protect from the get-go. The effect simply doesn't work if you pop a these flowers next to an already-infested plant.

Basil, Chinese cabbage, and nasturtiums also repel whiteflies, so if you struggle with this pest in the garden, you might want to sprinkle all of these plants as well as marigolds liberally throughout your space.

Learn more about how to combat a whitefly infestation in our guide.

### Nematodes

Marigolds are fantastic at repelling root-knot nematodes (*Meloidogyne* spp.). They secrete alpha-terthienyl from their roots, a chemical that inhibits the development of nematode eggs.



If you plant them in advance of other crops, root-knot nematodes won't be able to build up in the soil. And given how difficult it can be to control this common pest, that's welcome news!

Researchers at Yunnan Agriculture University showed via the Canadian Journal of Plant Science that marigolds were effective against root-knot nematodes when growing angelica.

But, of course, the effect likely works just as well when growing other plants that are susceptible to these pests.

The research indicated that regardless of whether you use rotation or intercropping, you can reduce populations of root-knot nematodes to the point where it may serve to improve crop yields.



Antoon T. Ploeg showed similar results in a study published in the journal Plant Diseases for the University of Hawaii at Manoa.

In this study, researchers looked at marigolds and their impacts on tomato yields, proving that the benefit is there for a variety of plant species.

## Slugs and Snails

What? These flowers repel slugs and snails?! Unfortunately, no they don't, but wouldn't that be nice?

Still, these flowers can help with gastropod control in your garden by acting as decoys instead, and attracting slugs and snails.

I know that might sound weird or a little counterintuitive, but since they are so easy to grow and they self-seed so readily, they are an excellent option to use as a trap crop for dealing with these slimy garden invaders.



Sometimes pest control isn't about what you repel, but what you can attract instead, to a targeted location.

If you decide to use marigolds as your sacrificial offering, be sure to head out each night with a flashlight and pluck as many snails and slugs off your plants as you can manage.

That way, you're able to limit the population and enjoy your beautiful flowers at the same time.

## Put Marigolds to Work in Your Garden

I know what you're thinking.

You probably took one look at this list and thought they might be imbued with some sort of seemingly magical pest-repelling powers (minus their ability to attract slugs and snails, of course). Unfortunately, that's not the way evolution works.

Testing has shown that marigolds don't repel cabbage flies (*Delia radicum*) or onion flies (*D. antiqua*), for example.



Are there any other plants that you've found to be pest-repelling powerhouses? Share in the comments so we can all benefit!

## Tips for Deadheading Marigolds

As far as satisfying gardening experiences go, I think I've got my top three favorites settled: biting into the first jalapeno of the season, watching my heuchera really wake up and shine in the early summer, and deadheading marigolds.

I can't say there's a more satisfying chore than deadheading these annuals. It's quick, it's easy, and it produces almost immediate results.

Even though it's such a rewarding task, there are many folks who aren't familiar with the practice at all, or who have never plucked a spent bloom from a marigold plant.

Without further ado, let's get into how to take care of these carefree and glowing annuals.

## Do I Really Need to Deadhead Marigolds?

In a few words, no, you don't need to deadhead marigolds. Your plants will continue to grow without this bit of maintenance and they'll still bloom, and they'll keep on keepin' on until the first frost.

But should you deadhead your plants? You've got two schools of thought on the matter to consider.



The first and overwhelmingly large majority will say that, yes, you absolutely should deadhead. This is because marigolds don't respond very positively to fertilizers – they tend to get leggy and flop over – so it is the best and easiest way to ensure strong and consistent blooms.

By removing the fading and spent blooms, you encourage the plant to produce more buds that will shortly become those sunny flowers we know and love.

It also encourages a generally healthier plant because the flowers wither as they go to seed. This process is much more energy-intensive than producing a few more flowers.

Deadheading also serves as a sort of pruning and shaping for your marigolds and helps to develop stronger, bushier plants instead of stretched-out and wispy plants.

On the other hand, you don't really need to deadhead marigolds. They'll grow just fine without this fussy form of care, and you'll get a few dozen (at least!) volunteer marigolds in your garden the next season from the flower heads that go to seed.

But in the interim, your plants might look more leggy than you'd like, or they won't have the same volume of blooms as they would if you were deadheading.

What would I do?



In the fall, I'd pluck those flower heads and save the seeds from the really dry and crispy ones, and I'd get to enjoy a few more weeks of summer flowers before the frost takes them away from me.

So, that kind of went in two directions without a solid answer, didn't it? Don't worry, here's a quick recap so you can make the call for yourself:

Deadheading your marigolds regularly will ensure you have tight, bushy plants that look excellent year round.

You will have a tidier garden the following year because none of your marigolds went to seed, and you'll have nonstop blooms throughout the season for the cost of a few minutes a day of garden maintenance.

Not deadheading regularly results in wispiest plants that might not look as stunning as they could, but they still have pretty flowers and look perfect in a less formal and more natural garden.

You'll be rewarded with random marigold volunteers the next season, but it can become difficult to control the volume of plants that are happy to eat up whatever empty space you've got.

Both options are perfectly fine; hey, it's your garden, you do you!

However, if you are in the "I don't wanna deadhead" club, I suggest you keep reading so you can learn to harvest some free flower seeds by snipping the spent blooms.

### How Often Should I Deadhead?

You can safely deadhead whenever the heck you feel like it. Any time of the day is acceptable, and any day of the season is good as another.



I recommend taking care of this little chore when you've got a few minutes to lose yourself in the act. My personal favorite time is in the morning, with a cup of coffee in one hand and a collection of marigold buds in the other.

You could take care of the plants daily if you like, or every couple of days. I'd suggest taking care of this task every few days rather than attending to it daily.

This enables your flowers to bloom and do their thing, and it gives the pollinators a chance to take advantage of the free meal.

#### How to Deadhead Marigolds

This is super complicated. Ready? Grab a spent bloom between your index finger and your thumb, then plop it off. What a satisfying sound it makes.

There you go, you just deadheaded a marigold.

Okay, there's a little more to it than that. But not much!

The first consideration to make is, which flowers am I removing?

You'll find a couple of different possible answers here, but my professional suggestion is to only remove flowers that are beginning to wilt but to also get them before the flowers get crispy (or soggy, if it's been rainy).



Removing flowers too early defeats the purpose since you're removing flowers that are perfectly fine. Wait too long and you're risking a few dozen seeds per bloom invading your garden space.

The best method for removing the spent flowers is the most satisfying. Pinch the bud between thumb and finger and snap it off, right above the closest set of leaves below the flower. Plop.

Seriously, that's the sound it makes. If you've got a better sound to describe it, let me know in the comments below.

However, if you like to throw on some gloves and grab your pruners, you're in luck. I'd recommend fine scissor-style pruners (or just plain scissors) to remove the buds. Pretend you're a surgeon or are defusing a bomb, and carefully snip the stem below the fading flower and right above the next set of leaves.

You can compost the buds if you like. My preferred method is to just toss them into the garden after I remove them. They'll break down!

Wait, You Said Something About Collecting Seeds!  
That's right, attentive reader!

If you want to collect seeds from your marigolds, wait until the flower heads have become crispy and dry. It takes a couple of days after they start fading to find that sweet spot.



My tried-and-true method for testing the flowers is to gently squish the flower head between my fingers. If it crinkles and then springs back to its normal shape, the seeds are perfect for plucking.

Keep an envelope handy. Remove the flower heads exactly as described above. With the crispy flowers in hand, freely pull the finished flower petals loose and drop them into the envelope.

Every single flower one of these petals will be attached to a marigold seed! Some people will recommend removing the spent flower petal from the seed itself, but I think this is overkill.

Store the seeds somewhere dry and cool over the winter, and plant them outside after the last frost in spring.

## How to Contact the Editor

If you have comments or you know I have given wrong advice then please contact me by email at

[info@yeovil-allotments-association.co.uk](mailto:info@yeovil-allotments-association.co.uk)

If you have something to contribute or have a say on allotment life, then please use my email to send your contributions.

I am going to process the magazine issue once a month, so if there are comments you would like to make they can be answered in future editions.

I would like to add that most of the articles are taken off the web and some well known gardening and allotments magazines have been read in the making of our magazine content.

We also have our own website at :

[www.yeovil-allotments-association.co.uk](http://www.yeovil-allotments-association.co.uk)

where you can find this magazine as well as a catalogue

Happy Allotmenting and best wishes,

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