

Marigolds have been used to honor deceased relatives by decorating graves and home altars, especially during Día de Muertos in Mexico. Their bright petals and distinctive scent are traditionally believed to help guide visiting spirits back to their families.

Flowers for a family altar

Many families create an ofrenda, or offering altar, with photographs and objects that recall relatives who have died. Marigolds bring color to the display, alongside candles, food, drinks and other offerings chosen for the people being remembered.

The marigold most closely associated with this tradition is cempasúchil, a name derived from Nahuatl. Its full orange and yellow flower heads are easy to spot among the other altar decorations. Some families arrange the blooms in vases, while others place loose flowers around photographs or across the altar.

An ofrenda is personal. One family might include a relative's favorite meal; another might set out a treasured object or a familiar drink. The flowers help create a place for remembrance without making every altar look the same.

Petals that show the way

Marigold petals are sometimes scattered in a trail leading from an entrance to the ofrenda. In some traditions, their color and scent are thought to guide the spirits of deceased relatives to the offerings waiting for them.

The trail can be a simple line of petals or part of a more elaborate design. It gives the flowers a practical role in the story of the celebration: they mark a welcome, rather like a bright path to the door. There is no need for a

perfectly straight line. Petals are not famous for staying put.

Remembering relatives at the grave

Marigolds are also placed on graves and used to decorate cemeteries during Día de Muertos. Families may clean a grave, bring flowers and spend time there remembering relatives. The customs vary by community and family.

The flowers may be arranged in several ways:

- Whole stems in a vase beside the grave
- Flower heads laid across the resting place
- Loose petals scattered as part of a decoration

These gestures can sit alongside conversation, prayer, music or shared food. A grave covered in marigolds is not just a colorful sight; it shows that someone has come to tend the place and remember the person buried there.

A tradition with deep roots

Marigolds have a long association with remembrance in Mexico, reaching back to Indigenous traditions. Día de Muertos also reflects influences that developed after the arrival of Spanish colonial rule, including observances connected with the Catholic calendar.

Today, the meaning of the flowers is not identical in every home. For some people, the idea of spirits following the petals is an important belief. For others, arranging marigolds may be a way to take part in a family custom and keep memories close.

A few stems or a handful of petals can make room for both sorrow and affection. They offer a visible welcome to the relatives a family still holds dear.

More background: planning funeral flowers