

Bell County Master Gardeners
Tip of the Week
By Jann Dworsky
“Marigolds---Good as Gold”

The weather is usually hot in September and unusually stressful on all kinds of plants. If you are wishing to start a flower garden this month, marigolds are the plants to make you successful! If you plant marigolds soon you can have a nice fall crop of marigolds but remember that they need 45-50 days from germination to blooming. They will start to bloom in mid October, and according to Doug Welch, renowned gardening writer, the first frost in Bell County is not until December 1.

Years ago, as a beginning gardener, marigolds were one of the first flowers I planted. In 1972, we had a new mobile home and one acre of bare pastureland. I planted marigolds beside our walkway and they turned out to be a great choice to brighten our yard. These flowers are disease resistant, easily sprouted from seed, and give us beautiful spots of color. They are heat tolerant, especially when planted from seed, and the foliage is dark green with a fine texture. They look especially attractive when placed by another plant with large smooth leaves, like zinnias for contrast. They are also edible.

Marigolds come in bright crayon yellow, neon orange, bronze, two-tone yellow and bronze, and even white. The blooms can be one inch across to four inches across and the height can from 12 inches to 24 inches. The smaller French marigolds, or *tagetes patula* are not French at all, but an original American flower. The French imported this beautiful flower from the New World about 1600 and wisely claimed marigolds for their own!

I especially like the Little Sparky that is about 12 inches tall with bronze and yellow flowers about one inch across. These short stocky plants stay upright for much of the growing season, but with a high wind or rain can knock them over. Stake them when they get about eight inches tall if you want to prevent this. Many times as a young mother I didn't have time to stake the marigolds, yet they gave us delightful color even when neglected.

To start a marigold bed, dig the soil 8-10 inches deep with a spading fork. Smooth the surface with a hoe until it is as soft as a chocolate cake mix. Lightly sprinkle the tiny straw like seed in the top surface and put less than one fourth of an inch of the softest soil on top. Pat the surface to firm it and sprinkle gently with water. Keep the seeds moist by watering twice a day in hot conditions. In a week you should have tiny dark green sprouts peeking up for your efforts and a month later, beautiful blooms. Mulch to protect the roots, conserve moisture, and encourage growth longer. . Planting now will give you color almost into winter! To keep the blooms coming into the late fall, deadhead, or cut off, the old dry blooms. Save these seeds, dry them well, and you will have your marigold seeds for next year.

Have any questions about gardening in Central Texas? Contact ask.bcmga@gmail.com

