

Mexican Ceremonial Flowers

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Flowers have always had a ceremonial importance in Mexican tradition. In pre-Hispanic times they were used to praise rulers and important persons, to honor the gods and to establish contact with the underworld. There were special rules for smelling them, and disease or other harm could come of not following them correctly. Only certain persons of rank were allowed to have flowers, and in some cases they were used to attract a loved one.

Today many of the flowers used in ancient times are still utilized in ceremonies, some of which are based upon indigenous traditions.

The tiger flower is known as *flor de tigre*, *oceloxóchitl*, *cocomite*, *flor de un día*, *achelele*, *jahuique* and *trinitaria*, among other common names. Its scientific name is *Tigridia pavonia* and it belongs to the botanical family *iri-*



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daceae, or the iris family. Its flowers have been used by ethnic groups to make wreaths and other decorations; its bulb is edible and is used to reduce fevers. The blossoms, which last only one day, were used to adorn the altars of pre-Hispanic gods, a custom that continues today, as the *flor de tigre* is a common ornament on altars in people's homes.

The orchid *Laelia autumnalis* is known as the lily, the flower of the dead, lily of All Saints and *sandieguitos* and is called *tzacuxochitl* in Nahuatl. As its common name indicates, it is used to decorate altars both in homes and churches on All Saints Day and the Day of the Dead in early

November. Appreciated for its flower's bright colors, the orchid plant is often grown in family orchards, generally thriving when placed on oak branches, and its flowers are used to decorate the home.

Cempasúchiles, or marigolds, very popular all over the world in floral arrangements, are strongly associated in Mexico with the festivities of the Day of the Dead. Their scientific name is *Tagetes erecta* and they belong to the *Asteraceae* family.

Every year *cempasúchiles* are placed on altars dedicated to the dead, in homes and cemeteries, which is why Mexicans associate the flower and its scent with graveyards. But the marigold is used as a medicinal plant to treat stomach inflammation and is recommended for controlling diarrhea. It was also used in ceremonies to mark the 11th month, *Ochpanixtli*, when a woman was sacrificed to the gods. Young boys danced every day for a week before the actual ceremony. Then women acted out a battle, during which they threw bouquets of

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Every year cempasúchiles are placed on every altar consecrated to the dead in homes and cemeteries, which is why Mexicans associate the flower and its scent with graveyards.

marigolds before the woman to be sacrificed, whom they considered an image of the gods. The women acted out this scene so the victim would not feel despondent, because if she were sad then many women would die in childbirth and many men in battle.

Magnolias such as *Magnolia grandiflora* of the *Magnoliaceae* have always been greatly admired for their beautiful shape and delicious perfume. In Nahuatl it was called *eloxochitl* as its blossom resembles a corn cob (*elote*, corn cob; *xochitl*, flower). The king offered these flowers to Huitzilopochtli, the god of war. The bracts were used to perfume choco-

late recipes and they are still used—both fresh and dried—in remedies for heart ailments as they are considered “cordial” or temperate. The fresh, strongly perfumed flowers are used in floral arrangements and mixed into wreaths into church and home altars.

The mayflower, *flor de mayo*, *cacalosúchil*, *nicté* and *flor de cuervo*, was also used by the ancient Mexicans in their ceremonies. Its scientific name is *Plumeria rubra* and it belongs to the family *Apocynaceae*. Its flowers are pink, yellow, white or crimson. The king would offer garlands made with this flower to the god of war and also to important persons. Even today in



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the states of Mexico and Morelos these flowers are placed by masons on crosses put up on construction sites on May 3.¹ In Chalma, State of Mexico, the *flor de mayo* is used to decorate wreaths sold to visitors entering the church, and to decorate the church itself. In Yucatán maidens would use the flower to captivate their loved ones, as this flower has long been associated with gods and rituals of love. In May young girls dressed in white make offerings of the flower to the Virgin Mary. **W**

¹ Day of the Holy Cross or mason's day. Construction workers celebrate with a party at their work sites, where they erect a cross and decorate it with flowers in a ceremony to bless the site.

[1] A string of *cacalosúchil* flowers from Ozuumba, Mexico, used to decorate crosses on mason's day.

[2] This magnolia is known in Nahuatl as *eloxochitl*, because its flower resembles a corn cob.

[3] *Cacalosúchil*.

[4] A mixture of plants used to heal heart disease, including magnolias.

[5] Magnolia.

[6] The flowers of *cacalosúchil* are greatly appreciated for their rich colors and perfume.

[7] The *flor de tigre* is so named because its center has a pattern of lines and colors like the stripes of a tiger.

[8] Marigolds are grown in Mexico to harvest at the end of October for the festivities of the Day of the Dead.

[9] The *cempasúchil* is the main flower used in offerings on altars and on tombs in cemeteries in central Mexico.

[10] Flowers were offered to important persons as a sign of respect. Illustration from the *Florentine Codex*.