



Marsh Marigold

Caltha palustris

By Barbara Nuffer

So taken was English poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson by marigold's vivid yellow flowers that he described them as shining "like fire in swamps." Indeed, marsh marigold's brilliant flowers are hard to overlook, as they welcome spring to New York State.

Marsh marigold is a member of the Ranunculaceae family, named by Pliny the Elder (23-79 A.D.) for plants that grow where frogs are found. Ranunculus is Latin for "little frog," and the abbreviated Rana is the genus of several of our native frog species.

The common name "marigold" is an adaptation of "Mary gold"

Indeed, marsh marigold (as its moniker suggests) grows in places where frogs can be found. It lives along the edges of streams, rivers, ponds and marshes. Its roots thrive in the rich organic mud and the plant can even be found growing vigorously in the middle of a flowing stream.

The common name "marigold" is an adaptation of "Mary gold" which refers to the flowers' presence at church festivals held in the Middle Ages devoted to the Virgin Mary. Historically, marsh marigold flowers were picked on the afternoon of April 30th, May Day Eve. Before nightfall a single flower was dropped into the letterbox of each house to protect it against evil fairies.

Some early American colonists referred to marsh marigold by another name, American cowslip. When they saw its golden flowers in the marshes, they named it for the familiar fragrant yellow flower of their English meadows, cowslip.

The glossy green, heart-shaped leaves of this herbaceous perennial plant complement the bright blossoms. The 1- to 2-inch wide flowers are made up of 5 to 9 shiny yellow sepals,

which protect developing flower buds and attract pollinators. The flowers bloom from early April until mid-June.

Marsh marigold flowers have several unique features. While they look yellow to us, they appear purple to bees. Ultraviolet light that reflects off each flower creates a black center which guides bees to the flower's nectar. The large amounts of nectar produced by marsh marigold early in spring make it an important food source for bees and flies. A line from Shakespeare refers to the

habit of the flowers opening their "golden eyes" in the morning and closing them at night.

All parts of the marsh marigold plant are poisonous to humans and dangerous to eat if untreated. Touching any part of the plant may cause skin irritation. Livestock are attracted to the bright flowers and glossy leaves, but consumption may prove fatal. Experts advise us to be careful when handling the flower and not to eat any of its parts. The Iroquois brewed a tea from the roots as an antidote for love charms. Unfortunately, it also made them very sick. Colonists ate the young tender leaves as spring greens after boiling them several times to remove poisonous compounds.

On a day with a clear blue sky, the golden flowers and shining emerald green leaves reflecting in the water are a sight to behold. So, as the snow melts into the rushing streams around New York, be sure to keep your eyes open for this bouquet of floral sunshine.

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