

SOUL OF MEXICO TOURS

DIA DE MUERTOS

Autumn has long been considered an auspicious time in many cultures around the world who acknowledge the changing colours as trees shed their leaves and the last of the crops become ripe for harvest. This is a transformative time of year when many living things enjoy their final moments before winter sets in. This fragile line is a promising window between the world of the living and the dead – a time when the veil between the two is so thin, it becomes near invisible.

As this is a holiday of national importance, there are many preparations that take place behind the scenes, such as growing enough flowers to supply countless cemeteries throughout the land. Traditional altar frames must be constructed, to be later decorated with an abundance of flowers. Grand arch-frames are also adorned with flowers and raised in key places, as doorways between the living and the dead. The cemeteries must be cleansed and cleared, to make way for a fresh and elaborate display of flowers, candles, food offerings, photographs and other elements significant to this observation. As Dia de Muertos draws near, the locals are in full action, creating beautiful flower-petal pathways from their homes to the cemeteries, erecting their altars on the graves of their loved ones, and preparing to light the candles. To imagine – all of this is happening as the annual cycle of the most important indigenous crop is coming to a close, with the corn harvest. To call this an important and busy time is an understatement.

There are a number of different flowers associated with Dia de Muertos. Most of them have a very strong scent, as it is believed this is pleasing to the souls of the ancestors. The most prominent flower is called cempasuchi – which is known in English as marigold. The Nahuatl root of this word is cempohualxochitl. Cempohual is in reference to the number 20, and when combined with xochitl, the word for flower, cempohualxochitl translates as

“flower with 20 petals.” Due to the bright yellow hue, reminiscent of the sun, marigolds were of significant importance to the sun worshipping *Mexica*. These flowers have been used for funerary rites and to adorn tombs since pre-Hispanic times. *It is interesting to note – in 2016, the marigold harvest of Mexico was worth an estimated 80.4 million pesos (SIAP).*

Terciopelo Rojo is also known as the cockscomb flower. Red in colour, this flower grows in various conditions and can last up to 8 weeks. It is unclear as to whether or not this flower was used in pre-Hispanic times, as it is most conflated today as representing the blood of Christ. There is much evidence of Christianity in modern Dia de Muertos celebrations, including crosses on graves, and this red flower is used to adorn the cemeteries, creating a beautiful contrast of colour with the bright yellow and orange marigolds.

Other flowers made their way from the Mediterranean and Asia to the cemeteries of Dia de Muertos. Hoary Stock, or Alheli Blanco, is a white flower often placed on the graves of young children. Baby’s breath is sometimes arranged together with hoary stock. Chrysanthemums from Asia are also used by some during Dia de Muertos, and this is directly connected to All Souls Day celebrations from Spain.

Other important elements during Dia de Muertos include water, salt and fire. Some say glasses of water are left to quench the thirst of the spirits, while others say it merely represents the underworld. Salt is connected to purification, and the flames of lit candles are important for lighting the way through the darkness. Some leave seeds for the dead – as an offering for prosperous crops in the afterlife. Baskets of food are also left for the ancestors, and are often comprised of fruits, pan de muertos, and other favourite foods of the deceased, such as different sweets, tamales, or even a can of beer with a package of cigarettes.

In 2008, Dia de Muertos was officially inscribed in UNESCO’s protection as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.