



Cultivation Notes

#6 February 1990

Marsh Marigold

Caltha palustris L.

A Rhode Island Native Plant

Family RANUNCULACEAE (Buttercups)

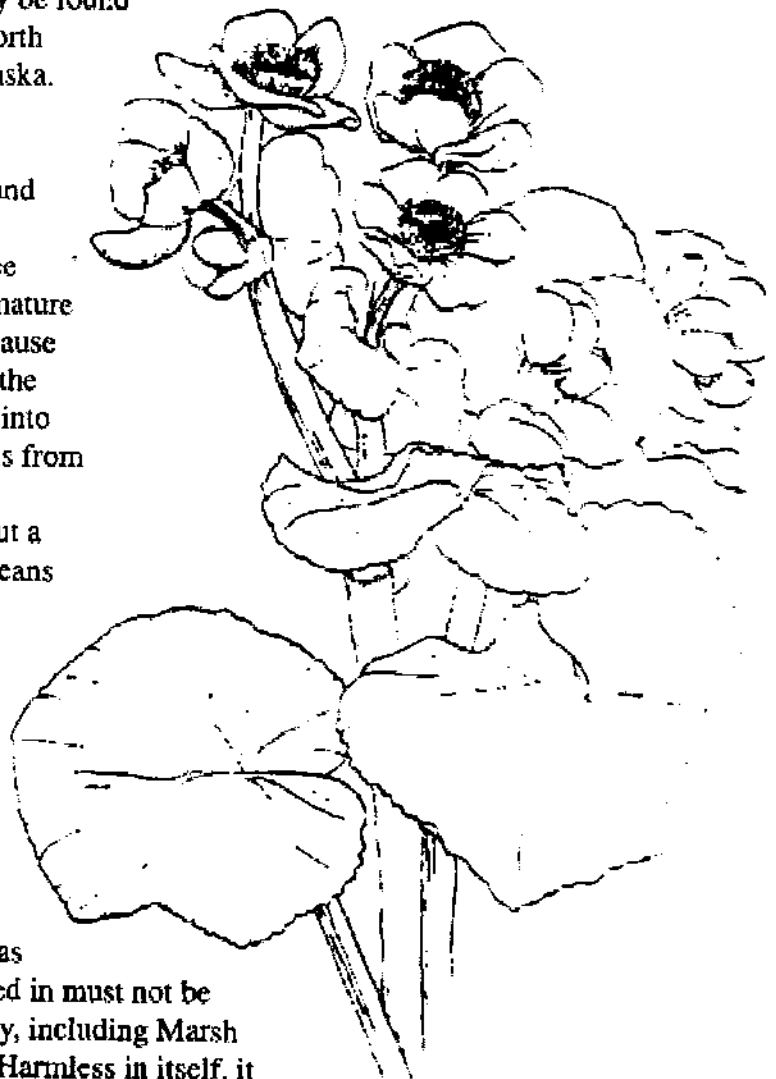
by Erika Poggie

Marsh Marigold is a succulent plant with glossy, heart-shaped leaves, a thick, hollow, branching stem, and bright, shiny yellow flowers. It blooms April through June (mainly the first half of May in Rhode Island) and grows in moist environments such as swamps,

marshes, wet meadows, and along streams. It may be found across Canada, south through New England to North Carolina, and west to Tennessee, Iowa, and Nebraska.

The flowers measure one to one-and-a-half inches, across, are perfect with between five and nine petal-like sepals, many stamens and pistils, and no petals; they are rich in nectar. The leaves are roundish or kidney-shaped and glossy, two to three inches across. Although the anthers and stigmas mature at the same time, cross fertilization is favored because the anthers open outward and those farthest from the stigmas open first. The fertilized flowers develop into pod-like fruits with many seeds. The entire plant is from eight inches to twenty-four inches in height.

The Marsh Marigold is not a marigold at all, but a buttercup. Its scientific name, *Caltha palustris*, means "marsh cup," from *calathos*, meaning "cup" and *palus* meaning "marsh." The Iroquois called the plant Onondaga, "it blooms in the spring." The flowers are also sometimes called cowslips or May-blob. The leaves were often used as a potherb in early spring, cooked and served much like spinach. However, they require several short boilings with changes of water between, and should not be eaten raw. The flower buds can be pickled and used like capers, but just as with the young leaves, the water the buds are boiled in must not be consumed. (Many members of the buttercup family, including Marsh Marigold, contain a compound called ranunculin. Harmless in itself, it breaks down easily to yield an oily substance called protoanemonin, which can cause extreme irritation to the mouth and digestive tract.)



CULTIVATION NOTES

Caltha palustris L. Marsh Marigold

Perennial. Blooms April to June. Found in swamps, wet woods, streams, and wet meadows; will grow in moist garden soil.

Propagation:

From seed: seed planted while it is still fresh and kept constantly wet usually germinates the first spring and produces flowering plants by the third year. Plants seed themselves under favorable conditions.

From divisions: the plants may be lifted after blooming, the long, coarse roots washed free of soil, and the crown separated carefully. One fair-sized clump may yield 8 to 10 strong divisions. Replanted, they may be left undisturbed for years or subdivided periodically.

Cultivation:

While this plant is usually found in several inches of water in nature, this is not necessary for successful cultivation. Given a moist, humus-rich soil and a plentiful supply of moisture, it will grow in most gardens. It is not fussy about soil acidity, but does well with a pH of 5.0 to 7.0. The important factor is that it must not dry out, especially during the growing season. Once it goes dormant it will tolerate a drier soil.

Like most spring wild flowers, it likes full sun before the leaves come out on the trees and shade thereafter. By midsummer the plant has usually died back, leaving no trace. It is hardy to Zone 3.

Keep records and keep RIWPS informed. The more sources of information we have, the more we will learn about our native plants and how to cultivate them. And remember, don't take plants from the wild: take them only from areas on your own property, or from properties you have written permission to dig on; even better, obtain them from a friend who grows them, or purchase the plants at the annual RIWPS Plant Sale.

References:

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