



Caltha palustris
Marsh-marigold, cowslip

Ranunculaceae (Buttercup Family)

Blooming season: Late April to mid-June

Plant:

Perennial, with hollow branched stems.
20 - 60 cm tall, usually obtaining full height after flowering (Smith 1966).



Leaves:

Deep green, 5-20 cm broad.
Kidney shaped or round with deep sinuses, margin toothed or entire.
Upper leaves have no, or very short, petiole.

Flower:

Bright yellow sepals, usually 5-10; there are no petals.
Color only present in waxy coating, scratching it off leaves sepal colorless (Sanders 2003).
2.5-4 cm wide, in a loose cymose cluster.
Numerous stamens.

Fruit:

Pod, or follicle.

Geographic range:

Type specimen location:
State: Throughout lower Michigan, scattered in Upper Peninsula.
Regional: Newfoundland to Alaska, south to South Carolina and Nebraska.



Habitat:

Local: Riparian
Regional: Edges of streams, wet swamps, does best in only partly shaded sites.

Common local companions:

Other wetland plants such as ferns, water cress, and elderberry.



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Usages:

Human: Although several authorities report the leaves to be poisonous when raw, containing an alkaloid and glucoside, Native Americans made cough syrup of parts, and used “boiled, mashed roots for treating running sores” (Smith 1966, p.139). Also the young plants have been used as “greens” after cooking. The flower buds have been used to make pickles, and the sepals have been used for a yellow dye.

Animal: Marsh marigolds are usually avoided by animals, likely because of the skin and mucous membrane irritant in the plant, possibly protoanemonin (Mabberley 1987).

Why is it called that?

One version for the name *Caltha* is that it is an old Latin name for the “true” marigold in the daisy family and due to a resemblance of the flowers was misapplied to this plant; another version is that *Caltha* comes from the Greek for cup or goblet, referring to its shape. *Palustris* means of swamps, descriptive of its favorite sites. The common names have more interesting derivations: ‘mari’ is a corruption of an Anglo-Saxon word for “horse blister” and a common name in parts of England remains “horse-blob”, blob being dialect for blister; another interpretation of ‘mari’ is that it comes from ‘mare’ meaning marsh. Cowslip (or cowslop) refers to a plant growing where cows have dropped their dung (Rickett 1966).

Prepared by: Barbara Lukacs Grob December 2007