

Edible Flowers - Beautiful and Delicious

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center



One of my sisters likes to nibble on my nasturtium blooms when visiting and I thought this was just an amusing quirk until a few friends stopped by and sampled some chive blossoms, a calendula and various violas as they wandered through the gardens. Turns out, edible flowers are quite in style now whether due to famous chefs or the Great British Bakeoff's Botanical Week or some other source of inspiration. Whatever the motive, any reason to grow more flowers is cause for celebration.

Quite a number of common flowers are edible. On the flip side, quite a few common flowers are poisonous so the first rule of thumb would be to positively identify the plant before eating. Succinct words of wisdom from the Royal Horticultural Society state, "If you are in doubt, don't eat." Also, just because you see a photo of some food item topped with flowers on Instagram or Pinterest, do not assume that the person who created that marvelous dish has great botanical knowledge. Confirm the plant's ID and edibility before serving. Keep in mind that just because a flower is edible, its taste not appeal to you.

Many species of edible flowers may already be in your gardens and containers. Edible nasturtiums (*Tropaeolum majus*) have large showy blossoms of red, orange, salmon, gold and yellow and a slight pepper flavor making them an excellent candidate for garnishing salads. The single flowers of signet marigolds (*Tagetes tenuifolia*) also come in shades of orange, yellow and red and add a touch of citrus flavor to food dishes.

Scarlet runner beans (*Phaseolus coccineus*) have lovely flowers in shades from scarlet to white. Grow them up a bean teepee or trellis to attract hummingbirds and to use the bright blossoms with their bean-like flavor in summer soups and salads.

Both the delicate, small flowers of violas and the larger expressive pansy flowers are edible. I find them somewhat bland in flavor but they make up for that with decorative appeal. The violas

freeze nicely in ice cubes so try some in summer drinks. Borage (*Borago officinalis*) is often found in herb gardens. It is a tall, perennial plant with hairy leaves. The delicate, pale true blue blossoms also make great ice cubes but the flowers can be added fresh to salads and other dishes for a taste of cucumbers.

Several other herb plants are also sources of edible flowers. Lavender is used in lemonades and other drinks, in baked goods and even to season meat dishes. The flowers can be used dried or fresh. The same goes for rosemary, which is usually grown for its savory leaves. If allowed to bloom, the small blue blossoms can flavor a variety of food items. The flowers of garden sage (*Salvia officinalis*) and pineapple sage (*S. elegans*) have delicate flavors so try them if you grow these plants. Chive blossoms are only available for a short time in late spring. The lovely, lavender, ball-shaped blooms impart a strong onion flavor to foods.

Many of us have probably cooked with sunflower oil or eaten sunflower seeds but did you know that unopened buds are supposed to taste like mild artichokes? The flower petals will definitely liven up a salad with their bright colors but their bittersweet taste might not be appealing so use sparingly.

Vegetable gardeners often find some of their radishes bolting or going to flower as the summer heat intensifies. Well not only do the radish roots have that spicy bite but so do the flowers. Just pick them off and add them to salads. You can do the same with Asian mustards and other Asian greens that start producing flowers before you got around to harvesting them. Squash blossoms can be used to decorate your dinner or stuff them and cook for an interesting appetizer.

These are just a few of the edible flowers you might be already growing. Others to consider trying are tuberous begonias, scented geraniums, bee balm, dianthus, dandelions, snapdragons, apple blossoms, elderberry blossoms and roses.

When thinking about which plants to collect edible flowers from, make sure they were not sprayed or otherwise treated with pesticides. Sometimes the best way to do this is grow your own from seeds or cuttings or look for plants from organic growers. People with allergies or asthma may want to check with their doctor before eating fresh or dried flowers.

Harvest flowers like you would vegetables when it is cool in the morning or evening. Flower buds should just be opening. Gently clean off flowers and store them in the refrigerator until ready to use. For most flowers, just the petals are eaten so pick out the stamen and styles. This will remove the pollen, which is a common part of a plant that may cause allergic reactions in some individuals. Of course, this would not be practical in tiny lavender flowers. For larger petaled flowers like roses, the white part at the base of the petal is often bitter so remove it before using.

If you need help identifying or growing edible flowers or have questions on other home or garden topics, contact the UConn Home & Garden Education Center, toll-free in CT, at (877) 486-6271, visit us at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or call your local Cooperative Extension Center.