NC STATE UNIVERSITY

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EDIBLE FLOWERS

Cyndi Lauderdale, Extension Agent, Wilson County Center
Erv Evans, Extension Associate

Flowers have traditionally been used in many types of cooking: European, Asian, East Indian, Victorian English, and Middle Eastern. Early American settlers also used flowers as food. Today, there is a renewed interest in edible flowers for their taste, color, and fragrance. Edible flowers can be used fresh as a garnish or as an integral part of a dish, such as a salad. Squash flowers can be fried in light batter or cornmeal. Some flowers can be stuffed or used in stir-fry dishes. Edible flowers can be candied; frozen in ice cubes and added to beverages; made into jellies and jams; used to make teas or wines; or minced and added to cheese spreads, herbal butters, pancakes, crepes, and waffles. Many flowers can be used to make vinegars for cooking, marinades, or dressings for salad. Herbal flowers normally have the same flavor as their leaves, with the exceptions of chamomile and lavender blossoms, where the flavor is usually more subtle.

Cautions

Not all flowers are edible: some may taste bad; and some are poisonous. Eat flowers only if you are certain they are edible. Consult a good reference book. An extensive list of poisonous plants can be found at the following Web site: http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/consumer/poison/poison.htm. A flower is not necessarily edible because it is served with food. A partial list of edible flowers can be found in Table 1. The flowers of most culinary herbs are safe to use.

Additional flowers that have been reported to be edible include: Black locust, *Robinia pseudoacacia*; Cattails, *Typha* spp.; Clary sage, *Salvia sclarea*; Common milkweed, *Asclepias syriaca*; Coriander, *Coriander sarivum*; Fuchsia, *Fushia* x *hybrida*; Gardenia, *Gardenia jasminoides*; Garlic, *Allium sativum*; Garlic chives, *Allium tuberosum*; Gladiolus, *Gladiolus hortulanus*; Hyssop, *Hyssopus officalis*; Leek, *Allium porrum*; Lemon, *Citrus limon*; Marjoram, *Origanum vulgare*; Marsh mallow, *Althaea officinalis*; Mustard, *Brassica* spp.; Nodding onion, *Allium cernuum*; Peony, *Paeonia lactiflora*; Orange, *Citrus sinensis*; Oregano, *Origanum vulgar*; Pineapple guava, *Acca sellowiana*; Plum, *Prunus* spp.; Radish, *Raphanus sativus*; Redbud, *Cercis canadensis*; Rose of Sharon, *Hibiscus syriacus*; Safflower, *Carthamus tinctorius*; Spiderwort, *Tradescantia virginia*; Strawberry, *Fragaria ananassa*; Water hyacinth, *Eichhornia crassipes*; Water lily, *Nymphaea odorata*; Winter savory, *Satureja montana*; Yucca, *Yucca* spp.

Pesticides for use on fruits and vegetables have undergone extensive testing to determine the waiting period between treatment and harvest and potential residuals on food. Pesticides used on flowers and ornamentals have not been evaluated to determine their safety on food crops. Do not eat flowers from

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florists, nurseries, garden centers, or flowers found on the side of the road. Consume only flowers that you or someone else has grown specifically for that purpose. If you have hay fever, asthma or allergies, it best not to eat flowers since many allergies are due to sensitivity to pollen of specific plants. It's best to introduce flowers into your diet one at a time and in small quantities.

Growing Edible Flowers

Growing edible flowers is essentially the same as growing flowers for ornamental purposes. Most flowers require a well-drained soil with a pH ranging from 5.5 to 6. Soil test. Use a 2- to 3-inch layer of mulch to reduce weeds, conserve soil moisture, maintain uniform soil temperature, and reduce the amount of soil splashed onto the plant during a heavy rain. Irrigate to keep plants actively growing and flowering; most plants will need 1 inch of water per week. If possible, avoid overhead irrigation because moisture on the leaf surface for extended periods of can increase the chances of disease development. Irrigating with a soaker hose works well.

Chemicals for pest control should be avoided, if possible. Hand-pick harmful insects. Beneficial insects, such as lady beetles and praying mantises, can be used to decrease insect populations. Growing different flowers together provides diversity to support a good beneficial insect population and keeps pest problems low. Many gardeners locate their edible flower garden away from other plants to avoid chemical spray drift. Many edible flowers can be successfully grown in containers.

Harvesting Flowers

Flavor can vary with growing conditions and cultivars. Conduct a taste test before harvesting large amounts of a particular flower. Flowers should be picked in the cool of the day, after the dew has evaporated. For maximum flavor choose flowers at their peak. Avoid flowers that are not fully open or that are past their prime. To maintain maximum freshness, keep flowers cool after harvest. Long-stem flowers should be placed in a container of water. Short-stemmed flowers, such as borage and orange blossoms, should be harvested within 3 to 4 hours of use, placed in a plastic bag, and stored in a refrigerator. Damp paper towels placed in the plastic bag will help maintain high humidity.

Because pollen can detract from the flavor, it's best to remove the pistils and stamens. Pollen may cause an allergic reaction for some people. Remove the sepals of all flowers except violas, Johnny-jump-ups, and pansies. For flowers such as calendula, chrysanthemum, lavender, rose, tulip, and yucca, only the flower petals are edible. The white base of the petal of many flowers may have a bitter taste and should be removed from flowers such as chrysanthemums, dianthus, marigolds, and roses.

For Further Reading

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Table 1. Edible Flowers.

Common Name	Scientific Name	Flavor	Color	Comments
Anise hyssop	*Agastache foeniculum*	Anise	Lilac	Self seeding perennial
Apple	*Malus* spp.	Floral	White to pink	*Eat in moderation since flowers contain cyanide precursors*
Arugula	*Eruca vesicaria sativa*	Spicy	White	Annual; once flowers form the leaves become bitter
Basil	*Ocimum basilicum*	Herbal	White, lavender	Annual
Bachelor's button	*Centaurea cyanus*	Vegetal	White, pink, blue	Annual; petals are edible; the calyx is bitter
Bee balm	*Monarda didyma*	Minty, sweet, hot	Wide range	Perennial
Borage	*Borago officinalis*	Herbal	Blue	Annual; use with nasturtium; *use sparingly — diuretic effects*
Broccoli	*Brassica officinalis*	Spicy	Green	Annual
Calendula	*Calendula officinalis*	Slightly bitter	Yellow, orange	Annual; most often used for color rather than flavor
Chamomile	*Chamaemelum noblis*	Sweet apple	White	Perennial; *drink tea in moderation — contains thuaone; ragweed sufferers may be allergic to chamomile*
Chervil	*Anthriscus cerefolium*	Herbal	White	Annual
Chicory	*Cichorium intybus*	Herbal	Blue	Perennial
Chives	*Allium schoeonoprasum*	Onion	Lavender-pink	Perennial; avoid eating whole flower; taste can be overwhelming
Chrysanthemum	*Chrysanthemum* spp.	Strong	Perennial	Use the florets; strong flavor
Dandelion	*Taraxacum officinale*	Sweet, honey-like	Yellow	Perennial; use young flowers, mature flowers become bitter; flowers close after picking
Daylily	*Hemerocallis* spp.	Vegetal, sweet	Wide range	Perennial; *may act as a diuretic or laxative; eat in moderation*
Dianthus	*Dianthus* spp.	Sweet clove flavor	Wide range	Perennial; remove the narrow base of the petals (bitter)
Dill	*Anethum graveolens*	Herbal	Yellowish-green	Annual

Table 1. Edible Flowers. (continued)

Common Name	Scientific Name	Flavor	Color	Comments
Elderberry	*Sambucus canadensis*	Sweet	White	Perennial; do not wash flowers since it removes much of the flavor
English daisy	*Bellis perennis*	Mildly bitter	Pink	Perennial; ray flowers have a mildly bitter taste
Fennel	*Foeniculum vulgare*	Mildly anise	Yellow-green	Normally grown as an annual
Hibiscus	*Hibiscus rosa-sinensis*	Mildly citrus	Rose, red	Showy edible garnish
Hollyhock	*Althea rosea*	Vegetal	White, pink, red	Showy edible garnish
Honeysuckle	*Lonicera japonica*	Sweet	White to pale yellow	Perennial; *do not use other honeysuckle flowers*
Johnny-jump-up	*Viola tricolor*	Wintergreen	Purple and yellow	Annual; the petals have little flavor unless the green sepals are included; *contain saponins and may be toxic in large amounts*
Lavender	*Lavendula* spp.	Sweet, perfumed flavor	Lavender	Perennial; use sparingly due to intense flavor; *lavender oil may be poisonous*
Lilac	*Syringa vulgaris*	Varies	Lavender	Wide variation in flavor — from no flavor to green and herbaceous to lilac
Linden	*Tilia* spp.	Honey-like	White	*Frequent consumption of linden flower tea can cause heart damage*
Lovage	*Levisticum officinale*	Celery	White	Perennial
Marigold	*Tagetes patula*	Bitter	Yellow, orange	Annual; Lemon Gem and Tangerine Gem have the best flavor
Mint	*Mentha* spp.	Minty	Purple	Perennial; each type of mint has its own unique flavor
Nasturtium	*Tropaeolum majus*	Spicy, peppery	Wide range	Annual
Okra	*Abelmoschus esculentus*	Vegetal	Yellow	Annual
Pansy	*Viola* x *wittrockiana*	Vegetal	Wide range	Annual; has a slightly sweet green or grassy flavor; petals have a mild flavor; whole flower has a wintergreen flavor
Passion flower	*Passiflora* spp.	Vegetal	Purple	Vine; showy flowers best used as a garnish
Pineapple sage	*Salvia elegans*	Sweet, fruity	Red	Perennial; flavor has a hint of mint and spice

Table 1. Edible Flowers. (continued)

Common Name	Scientific Name	Flavor	Color	Comments
Red clover	*Trifolium pratense*	Sweet	Red	Annual; raw clover flowers are not easily digestible
Rose	*Rosa* spp.	Perfumed	Wide range	Perennial: remove the white, bitter base of the petal
Rosemary	*Rosmarinus officinalis*	Herbal	Blue	Perennial
Sage	*Salvia officinalis*	Herbal	Purple-blue	Perennial
Scarlet runner bean	*Phaseolus vulgaris*	Vegetal	Purple	Annual; flowers last only one to two days
Scented geraniums	*Pelargonium* spp.	Varies	Wide range	Perennial; the flavor is usually similar to the scent of the leaves
Signet marigold	*Tagetes signata*	Spicy, herbal	Yellow	Annual; *may be harmful if eaten in large amounts*; other marigolds are edible but have a tangy to bitter flavor
Snapdragon	*Anthirrhinum majus*	Bitter	Wide range	Annual; use as a garnish
Squash	*Curcubita pepo*	Vegetal	Yellow	Annual
Sunflower	*Helianthus annuus*	Varies	Yellow	Annual; flower is best eaten in bud stage when it has an artichoke flavor; petals of open flowers have a bitter-sweet flavor; *pollen can cause a reaction for some people*
Sweet woodruff	*Galium odoratum*	Sweet, nutty, vanilla	White	*Can have a blood thinning effect if eaten in large amounts*
Thyme	*Thymus* spp.	Herbal	White	Perennial herb
Tulip	*Tulipa* spp.	Vegetal	Wide range	Bulb; good stuffed
Violet	*Viola odorata*	Sweet, perfumed	Purple, white	Perennial; use candied or fresh