



EDIBLE FLOWERS

Part of the fun of growing your own is to have produce that you can't buy in the shops. Like many vegetables that have a short shelf life, edible flowers need to be home grown. They always look wonderfully chic and some are very tasty. They are an excellent addition to the gardener-cook's repertoire.

WORD OF WARNING

At the risk of being obvious ...

Don't eat any flower unless you are sure you know what it is and that it is safe to eat

(e.g. don't confuse garden peas with sweet peas! Don't confuse pelargoniums with geraniums!)

Avoid any flowers that come from florists, nurseries or roadsides as they may have been treated with pesticides or be polluted.

As a general rule, only eat the petals unless specified otherwise.

Some of the most popular edible flowers are:

Nasturtiums have a good peppery kick and are good for salads. You can eat the leaves and the whole flower. They can be stuffed with cheese or guacamole and the tiny seed heads can be used like capers on pizza. There are many different types, trailing, climbing, large and small. Some of the climbers will reach 10ft. For containers choose dwarf varieties. Pretty types are 'Whirlybird' and the scarlet 'Empress of India'. Nasturtiums spring very easily from seed. They like full sun and don't need much attention apart from watering. When they go over pull them out and shake and they will reseed for next year. If you get too many they are easy to pull out.

Marigolds are another easy-to-grow annual that flowers continually for months. 'Lemon Gem' and 'Tangerine Gem' are the best for eating. These are unusual varieties that will probably need to be ordered from a seed merchant. The petals can be sprinkled on salads.

Chrysanthemums are perennials. Grow them in full sun. The petals have a strong rather bitter taste. The easiest types to prepare in the kitchen are the open-petalled varieties. They can be sprinkled on salads, used in stir-fries or to garnish soups. Don't bother with the leaves unless you are growing chop suey greens or Chrysanthemum greens, *Chrysanthemum coronarium*. These are hugely popular all over Africa and Asia as a green vegetable but are usually grown in the West as an ornamental which is rather a shame.

Herbs

Chive flowers are pretty in salads, tasting mildly of onion. Chives need six hours of sunshine every day in summer to grow well. You can pull the flowers apart and use them in the same way as the leaves, or use them whole as a decoration or garnish. They look wonderful in herbal vinegars. They are most easily grown from divisions of the little bulbs. Harvest the flowers as soon as they open and before they toughen up. Cut them back after flowering to reinvigorate them and prevent them seeding. Chives are grown in a pot as they can become rampant in open ground.

Garlic flowers can be added to any dish that you are flavouring with the leaves.

Chamomile. The best type for culinary use is the annual chamomile. It tastes less bitter than the perennial type which is mostly used for medicinal purposes. Sow from seed in full sun. Use the flower heads, fresh or dry for tea, or combine with the leaves of other herbs like lemon verbena or mint. You can also sprinkle the petals over salads.

Rosemary grows well in a pot and the leaves are always useful for meat dishes. The flowers can be used to good effect sprinkled on many vegetable dishes and look pretty in herb vinegars.

Dill springs easily from seed when the soil has warmed up (about now). Sow in full sun in well drained soil. They grow up to 3ft. You can harvest the leaves from an early age. Pick the flowers when young before they go brown. Break up the flower heads and sprinkle them in omelettes, on vegetable dishes. Dill is a classic partner for spinach. The flowers are good in fish sauces and with mild cheeses. The whole flower heads can be used in pickles.

Thyme produces clouds of edible flowers over a long period. The French thyme, *Thymus vulgaris*, is the best culinary type. There is also lemon thyme, *T. citrodurus*, and caraway thyme, *T. herba-barona*. All need full sun and fast drainage. Thyme flowers make a lovely garnish on the stem or the tiny flowers can be separated and sprinkled on dishes or incorporated into cheeses and flavoured butters.

Borage tastes strongly of cucumber and is best known for flavouring Pimms. The star-shaped periwinkle blue flowers are delightful in salads. You can also freeze them in ice cubes or add them to iced tea. You can eat the leaves as well. Prepare the flowers by removing the hairy sepals. Pinch the middle of the flower and pull the petals off the corolla. Borage is easy to grow from seed.

Bee balm is a North American plant, hugely popular with bees. It is an easy to grow perennial. It can reach four feet so it would need a big pot. The red varieties like 'Cambridge Scarlet' and 'Firecracker' are said to have the best flavour, being spicy, strong and minty. There is also an annual, 'Lamabata'. The petals can be added to salads, fruit salad as well as punch or other cold drinks.

Vegetable flowers

If you leave the odd vegetable to flower (sometimes you have to wait another season for the biennials, like parsnip) you can produce many delicious flowers. They have the added advantage of drawing in bees like a magnet.

Peas. It is really worth leaving a few to flower as the flowers taste like the freshest pea. Absolutely delicious on salads. They can also be candied.

Broccoli is sown in spring for summer eating or in summer for winter eating. If you don't harvest it you will soon get the flowers which can be used whole as decoration. They taste mildly of broccoli.

Runner beans were originally brought over from Mexico as ornamentals. The pretty flowers taste pleasantly of peas and beans. They look great as decoration on bean soups or sprinkled on salads.

Radishes produce dainty flowers in different colours if you leave them (or when they bolt). They are quite tasty and provide colour to dishes.

Flowers for cooking

Courgettes are hugely prolific in both flower and fruit. Courgette flowers can be stuffed with cheeses, breadcrumbs or meat mixtures and baked or deep fried. Keep the stems on for stuffing. They look tickly but smooth out when cooked.

Day lilies are commonly used in Japanese tempura and the buds are used for soups. They can be sautéed or baked in the same way as courgette flowers or used as an elegant garnish.

Flowers for sweet dishes and candies

Roses. Grow small varieties for pots. Rosebuds are good for candying as decoration. The petals can be used for jellies, rose waters or fruit syrups. Remove the white section at the bottom of the petal as it is bitter.

Lavender is an excellent subject for container growing. The flowers can be used fresh or dried. Uses include flavouring jellies, sorbets, ice creams, syrups, vinegars and sugars.

Violas and pansies taste rather like lettuce. They make pretty garnishes, fresh or candied.

Pelargoniums have different flavours depending on variety. *Pelargonium tomentosum* tastes of peppermint. *Pelargonium citronellum* and *P. crispum* have a distinct lemon flavour. They can be used as a garnish or to flavour sweets, jellies and tarts. They candy well.

Flowers for predators

Flowers are useful for bringing in helpful predators that will demolish the pest population. Best known amongst these are ladybirds, lacewings and parasitic wasps. Parasitic wasps are tiny and completely harmless to humans. They lay their eggs on the aphid or cutworm larvae for their young to devour when they hatch out.

Tiny insects like small flowers that are in proportion to themselves. Top favourites are carrot, coriander, fennel, dill, parsnip, and parsley. Apart from coriander, these are biennial so you need to leave a few to flower in the second year.

Bees love the daisy family. These flowers may appear to be large but in fact they are composed of many small flowers. These include yarrow, cosmos, sunflowers and dahlias. They will also make a bee line for flowers of asparagus, all the brassicas, broad beans and runner beans. They love herbs including borage, sage, lavender, rosemary, marjoram, all the mints and thymes as well as bee balm.

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