



Garden Notes

GN 155

GROWING EDIBLE FLOWERS IN YOUR GARDEN

While gardeners love flowers for their beauty outdoors in the garden and indoors in a vase, few grow them for eating. That is unfortunate, because many flowers are edible, and eating them is not as exotic as it sounds. Edible flowers can bring lively flavors, colors, and textures to salads, soups, casseroles, and other dishes. The use of flowers as food dates back to the Stone Age with archaeological evidence that early man ate flowers such as roses.

Flowers have been used for centuries for making teas, but flower buds and petals also have been used, from China to Morocco to Ecuador, in soups, pies, and stir-fries. Rose flowers, dried daylily buds, and chrysanthemum petals are a few of the flowers that our ancestors used in cooking. In fact, many of the flowers we grow today were originally chosen for the garden based on their aroma and flavor, not their beauty.

EATING FLOWERS

Any flower that is not poisonous or that does not cause a negative reaction is considered edible. However, just because a flower is edible does not necessarily mean it tastes good. Before you go munching through the flower garden, there are a few criteria you should keep in mind.

- Be sure to positively identify a flower before eating it. Some flowers have look-alikes that are not edible.
- Do not eat flowers if you have asthma, allergies, or hay fever.
- Only eat flowers that have been grown organically so they have no pesticide residue.
- Collect flowers for eating in the cooler parts of the day, preferably early morning after the dew has evaporated or late afternoon.
- Choose flowers that are at their peak, avoiding those that are not fully open or are starting to wilt.

EDIBLE ANNUAL FLOWERS

Listed below are some common edible annual flowers and herbs that are easy to grow as well as tasty. Included are a number of herbs and vegetables that have edible flowers.

- Borage (*Borago officinalis*) – Star-shaped flowers are blue, purple, and lavender with a slight cucumber flavor. Remove the green hair sepals and serve only the blue petals.
- Calendula (*Calendula officinalis*) – Yellow, gold, or orange flowers with a tangy, peppery taste. Used more for color than flavor in recipes; adds a golden hue to foods. Only the petals are edible.
- Chamomile (*Matricaria recutita*) – Small white daisy flowers with a pleasant pineapple flavor. Only the petals are edible.
- Nasturtium (*Tropaeolum majus*) – Flowers in shades of white to red, with a watercress and peppery flavor. The flowers, leaves, and seedpods are all edible.
- Petunia (*Petunia hybrida*) – Flowers in a wide range of colors with a mild flavor.
- Pineapple sage (*Salvia elegans*) – Scarlet flowers with a distinct pineapple flavor.
- Radish (*Raphanus sativus*) – Yellow, pink, or white flowers with a spicy-hot flavor.
- Runner beans (*Phaseolus coccineus*) – Bright orange to scarlet flowers with a mild, raw bean/pea flavor and a slightly crunchy texture.
- Sage (*Salvia officinalis*) – Blue, purple, white, or pink flowers with a slightly musky flavor.

- Scented geranium (*Pelargonium* spp.) – White, red, pink, or purple flowers with flavors such as apple or lemon, depending on the variety. The rose- and lemon-scented varieties have the best flavor.
- Signet marigold (*Tagetes tenuifolia*) – Gold, yellow, or orange flowers with a citrus flavor.
- Snapdragon (*Antirrhinum* spp.) – Flowers in a wide range of colors with a bland to bitter flavor.
- Squash (*Cucurbita* spp.) – Yellow to orange flowers with a mild, raw squash flavor. Remove stamens and pistils prior to eating.
- Sunflower (*Helianthus annuus*) – Flowers come in white, yellow, orange, or burgundy. Flower petals are bittersweet. Only the petals are edible.
- Tuberous begonia (*Begonia x tuberhybrida*) – Flowers are white, pink, yellow, red, orange, or multi-colored and have a light lemon flavor and a crisp texture. **Note: Only hybrid varieties are edible.**
- Viola, pansy, and Johnny-jump-up (*Viola* spp.) – Violet, white, pink, yellow, or multi-colored flowers with a sweet lettuce flavor.

EDIBLE PERENNIAL FLOWERS

Flowers of these perennials and herbs offer a broad range of flavors.

- Baby's breath (*Gypsophila* sp.) – White or pink flowers with a mild, slightly sweet flavor.
- Bee balm (*Monarda didyma*) – Red, pink, white, or lavender flowers with a strong, spicy, mint flavor.
- Chives (*Allium* spp.) – Onion chives, also known as garden chives (*A. schoenoprasum*) have lavender flowers with a mild onion flavor. Garlic chives (*A. tuberosum*) have white, star-shaped flowers with an onion/garlic flavor.
- Daylily (*Hemerocallis* spp.) – Flowers come in a wide range of colors. The flower buds have a slight asparagus or green bean taste. Flower petals are crunchy (like a crisp lettuce leaf) with a flavor that ranges from slightly metallic to sweetly floral or faintly of chestnuts/beans.
- Dianthus/Pinks (*Dianthus* spp.) – Pink, rose, white, or red flowers with a spicy, clove-like flavor.
- Hollyhock (*Alcea rosea*) – Flowers come in a wide range of colors and have a bland to slightly bitter flavor.
- Red clover (*Trifolium pratense*) – Sweet-tasting pink or red flowers.
- Tulip (*Tulipa* spp.) – Come in a wide range of colors and have a mild, slightly sweet pea-like flavor and a tender, crisp texture. **Note: Some people are allergic to tulips, so take precautions when trying them initially. Look for numb hands or an upset stomach.**
- Violet (*Viola odorata*) – Small purple, yellow, or blue flowers with a strong, sweet, very floral flavor.

TREE AND SHRUB FLOWERS

Even trees and shrubs produce edible flowers. Here are a few of the best.

- Apple (*Malus* spp.) – White to pink flowers with a floral to slightly sour taste.
- Elderberry (*Sambucus* spp.) – Sweet cream-colored flowers. **Note: Some of the wild, red-berried varieties are poisonous, so be sure to get the cultivated edible varieties. Use only the florets, as all other parts of the plants, including the stems, are poisonous.**
- Hibiscus (*Hibiscus rosa-sinensis*) – Flowers are orange, red, or purplish-red with cranberry and citrus overtones. Makes a nice beverage when boiled.
- Lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*) – English lavender has tiny purple flowers with a strong lemon-perfume taste.
- Lilac (*Syringa* spp.) – Fragrant lavender, white, or pink flowers with a slightly bitter, lemony flavor.
- Rose (*Rosa* spp.) – Flowers come in a range of colors from white and yellow to pink, orange, and red. Most varieties have a strong floral taste; however, some of the dark red varieties may have a strong metallic taste. Remove the bitter white portion of the petals. Rose hips are also edible.
- Rosemary (*Rosmarinus officinalis*) – Flowers are light blue, dark blue, or pink and have a slightly pine-like, resinous flavor.

HOW TO GATHER EDIBLE FLOWERS

- Like any fruit or vegetable, when and how you harvest can influence the quality of the food. Harvest early or late in the day when the blossoms are cool. Sugars and volatile oils, the basis for aroma and flavor, are highest before heat and photosynthesis converts them into starch.
- Pick flowers and place them in a shaded basket without crushing them. Most blossoms should be harvested at or near opening. Discard blemished blossoms. Gently clean off any dirt or insects and store clean blossoms in a hard container in the refrigerator to prevent crushing.
- Before using, gently wash the flowers and remove the stamens and styles (reproductive parts inside the flower) before eating. Flower pollen can detract from the flavor, and some people are allergic to it.
- Not all parts of all flowers are edible. While flowers such as violas, violets, scarlet runner beans, and clover are entirely edible, some flowers have only edible petals. These include calendula, chamomile, roses, sunflower, and tulip. Pluck the petals of these flowers for use in salads and cooking. For most flowers (except violas and pansies), the sepals (parts below the petals) are not tasty and should be removed before eating. In addition, some flowers, such as roses, dianthus, and signet marigolds have a bitter white portion at the base of the petals where they attach to the flower that should be removed.
- Have fun experimenting with beautiful and tasty flowers that can dazzle your friends and family at mealtimes.

SOME FLOWERS TO AVOID

While exploring different ways of using edible flowers, be careful. There are a number of poisonous plants containing substances that can cause symptoms such as upset stomachs, rashes, and headaches. Be very careful when tasting flowers, because even if they do not make you sick or cause any of the other symptoms listed above, some toxic reactions take time to manifest themselves. It is important to make sure that you properly identify the flowers before eating them. And remember...even edible flowers should be eaten in moderation.

Some common landscape and flowering plants that you should **avoid eating** include:

| Common Name | Scientific Name | Part of Plant |
|------------------------------|---|------------------------|
| Amaryllis | <i>Hippeastrum puniceum</i> | Bulb |
| Anemone | <i>Anemone tuberosa</i> and other spp. | All |
| Autumn Crocus | <i>Colchicum autumnale</i> | All |
| Azalea | <i>Rhododendron</i> spp. | All |
| Belladonna Lily (Naked Lady) | <i>Amaryllis belladonna</i> | Bulb |
| Bird-of-Paradise | <i>Strelitzia reginae</i> | Seeds and pods |
| Buckeye (Horse Chestnut) | <i>Aesculus arguta</i> ; <i>A. hippocastanum</i> ; other spp. | Seeds, flowers, leaves |
| Buttercup | <i>Ranunculus</i> spp. | All |
| Caladium | <i>Caladium bicolor</i> and other spp. | All |
| Cardinal Flower | <i>Lobelia cardinalis</i> | Bulb |
| Castor Bean | <i>Ricinus communis</i> | Seeds |
| Clematis | <i>Clematis</i> | All |
| Daffodil | <i>Narcissus pseudonarcissus</i> | Bulb |
| Datura | <i>Datura meteloides</i> | All |
| Delphinium | <i>Delphinium</i> spp. | All |
| Four O'Clock | <i>Mirabilis</i> | Seeds, roots |
| Foxglove | <i>Digitalis purpurea</i> | All |
| Gloriosa Lily | <i>Gloriosa</i> spp. | All |
| Hydrangea | <i>Hydrangea</i> spp. | All |
| Iris | <i>Iris</i> spp. | Leaves, rootstock |
| Jessamine | <i>Gelsemium sempervirens</i> | All |
| Lantana | <i>Lantana</i> spp. | All |

| | | |
|------------------------------------|---|-------------|
| Larkspur | <i>Delphinium</i> spp. | All |
| Lily-of-the-Valley | <i>Convallaria majalis</i> | All |
| Lupine | <i>Lupinus</i> spp. | All |
| Monkshood | <i>Aconitum</i> spp. | All |
| Narcissus | <i>Narcissus</i> spp. | All |
| Oleander | <i>Nerium oleander</i> | All |
| Poinsettia | <i>Euphorbia pulcherrima</i> | All |
| Rhododendron | <i>Rhododendron</i> spp. | All |
| Star-of-Bethlehem | <i>O rnthogalum</i> spp. | All |
| Sweet Pea (not edible pea flowers) | <i>Lathyrus</i> spp. | All |
| Tansy | <i>Tanacetum vulgare</i> | All |
| Wisteria | <i>Wisteria floribunda</i> and <i>W. sinensis</i> | Pods, seeds |

This is by no means an exhaustive list of non-edible flowers. If a plant is not on this list, do not assume that it is edible or non-poisonous. You should thoroughly research any flower before eating it.

SOURCES

- National Gardening Association, <http://www.garden.org/ediblelandscaping/?page=edible-flowers>
- *The Edible Flower Garden*, Rosalind Creasy, 1999, Periplus Editions
- Publication: "Edible Theme Gardens to Enjoy", Rosalind Creasy, 2009