Master Gardener Newspaper Articles

Volunteer Program

Tulare/Kings Counties

Edible Petals

by Dorothy M. Downing, UC Master Gardener

Edible flowers do triple duty. You can have their beauty and fragrance and eat them, too. Today, there is a renewed interest in edible flowers because their taste, color, and fragrance enhance food. Edible flowers may be preserved for future use by drying, freezing or steeping in oil. They can be used in drinks, jellies, salads, soups, syrups and main dishes. Flower-flavored oils and vinegars are made by steeping edible flower petals in these liquids. Candied flowers are crystallized using egg white and sugar (as a preservative).

Flowers that were once used only as a garnish on the side of a plate have actually become a part of the dish. Many of them taste the way they smell. Over 100 garden plants that produce edible flowers so you have lots of choice in creating your own edible flower garden. But of course, before you go out and start grazing on blooms you should know what you are eating. To play it safe, you can always eat the blooms of common herbs such as rosemary, basil and fennel. And if you can eat the fruit of a plant you can almost always eat its flower. For example, apple and lemon flowers as well as squash and pea blooms can be quite tasty. It is advisable to only eat organically grown flowers. Pesticides can last for months on a plant. Of course not every flower will send your taste buds reeling, so before you put it in a meal, sample it. If you don't like its flavor, try another one.

A Selection of Edible Petals

Nasturtiums are renowned for their peppery flavor and they come in a variety of vivid colors, including red, yellow and orange. This annual produces the most flowers in full sun. Do not fertilize because plants in highly fertile soils produce lush foliage but few flowers. Both the leaves and the flowers have a spicy, peppery flavor and are best eaten uncooked. Toss the petals into green salads, cooked vegetables, oils and vinegar, and use the blossoms to decorate the plate.

Pansies, violas and Johnny-jump-ups come in every color of the rainbow, so it can be fun to use them to embellish food. Plan your spring party months ahead of time and you can grow pansies to match your color scheme, the dress or shirt you plan to wear, or your favorite color. They bloom best in cool weather, sun or shade, and in moist, well-drained soil. Their flavor is slightly minty to a sweet wintergreen flavor. Use the petals to color butter or float the petals in a punch bowl or candy to use on cakes and pies.

Tulips are said to have a wonderful crunch, especially at the base of the petals. The flavor ranges from pea to bean like. Use tulip petals as a low calorie substitute for chips with dip. Try chopping the petals into tuna fish salad, and then serve it on tulip petals. What a gorgeous dish to serve at your next party!

The blue star-shaped blossoms of the annual borage plant practically fall off the plant in midsummer when they are ready to eat. The flowers make a very attractive garnish on a plate. They have a crisp cucumber flavor or honey-like taste that is delicious in lemonade. Float in drinks or freeze in ice cubes. Borage does not dry well. If eaten in large quantities, it can have a diuretic effect.

Dianthus, or cottage pinks, are a delightful perennial in the garden and have a sweet clove like scent and flavor that can fill the morning air. Capture that scent by chopping the petals and mixing them into softened sweet butter and spread it on bread. Toss the petals into a fruit salad for a perky accent. You can also infuse the petal in water for tea or use them to make a delectable sorbet.

Calendula or pot marigold may have either yellow or orange flowers. You can use the chopped petals, either fresh or dried, and use them as a substitute for pricey saffron. Watch out, because the taste is slightly bitter, so don't overdo. The petals will impart a lovely color to cheese, rice and potato dishes, and can be used to make a tea. Dry individual petals on paper (petals shouldn't touch each other) and store in a moisture tight container.

"Lemon Gem" and "Tangerine Gem" marigolds are said to be the tastiest of the marigolds. The foliage has a lemony scent and the petals of these annual flowers can be sprinkled over a potato salad to add a citrusy tarragon flavor. Or try them on cooked vegetables or in deviled eggs.

From Garden to Kitchen

Edible flower flavors vary with the weather. When it is sunny and dry, the flavors are the most intense. For several days after a heavy rain, the flavor is weaker as if it were diluted by all the water. Harvest edible flowers early in the day; after the dew has dried but before the sun becomes intense. Put long-stemmed flowers in water and keep in a cool place. Use short-stemmed blossoms within a few hours of harvest or store between layers of damp paper towels or in a plastic bag in the refrigerator. Do not wash the flowers until just before you are ready to use them. If you use flowers in a meal, always check for insects.

Flowers grown in different locations can have different tastes, because of different soil types, fertilization, and environmental conditions. Flowers may taste different at the end of the growing season and can vary from year to year. Be sure to taste them before serving.

Guidelines

If you have allergies, introduce edible flowers gradually, as they may aggravate some allergies. Some sources suggest that if you have asthma or hay fever, you shouldn't eat flowers at all. Remove pistils and stamens from flowers before eating. Separate the flower petals from the rest of the flower just prior to use to keep wilting to a minimum. Eat only the flower petals for most flowers except pansies violas, and Johnny-jump-ups, in which sepals add flavor.

Some flowers in particular to be avoided (this is not a complete list) are: azalea, belladonna, calla lily, crocus, daffodil, foxglove, oleander, rhododendron, jack-in-the-pulpit, lily of the valley, and wisteria. Be sure to check 2 or 3 sources to make sure flowers are edible. Do not eat flowers from florists, nurseries, garden centers, or flowers found on the side of the road. They may have been treated with pesticides. Consume only flowers that you or someone else has grown specifically for that purpose.

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