

Edible Flowers

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Edible flowers can spice up your garden *and* your table.

Did you know that you can jazz up your landscaping and add pizzazz to your dinner table at the same time? You can actually eat your colorful landscaping by planting edible flowers, which add flavor, color and variety to your meals.

Some of these edibles may already be in your landscaping, which need only be trimmed (remove stamens and pistil; reserve petals) then added as whole flowers or individual petals to a recipe or as a garnish.

Apple blossoms are a good example of a perennial edible. Why not thin the blossoms in late spring to maximize the apple harvest, then add the bounty to a Waldorf salad or a green salad dressed with cider vinaigrette? The petals also may be steeped in cream to top apple pie. Or add to syrups, apple sauces, dessert crepes, sweet breakfast pastries or French toast. In other words, if apples are part of the dish, the blossoms would likely enhance the flavor and appearance. Be sure to harvest the blossoms before spraying with chemicals. The chemicals may alter the flavor of the blossoms but more importantly may not be approved by the EPA for edibles.



If apples are on the menu in the form of sauce, dessert crepes or sweet breakfast pastries, the blossoms will likely enhance the flavor and appearance. Photo by Jason Miller.

Lilac (*Syringa vulgaris*) is a common shrub that grows well locally and produces prodigious blossoms mid-spring. The best time to harvest these flowers is right after they open. The individual florets can be added to soft cheeses or yogurt. Use them as a colorful, fragrant garnish to sweet dishes, such as cookies, cakes and scones.



Snip off individual lilac florets and add them to soft cheeses or yogurt. Or, use them as a colorful, fragrant garnish to sweet dishes, such as cookies, cakes and scones. Photo by Jason Miller.

Other perennial edibles that are hardy in this area are begonias (*Begonia X tuberhybridia*) and daylilies (*Hemerocallis spp.*). Be sure to test the flavor of begonia blossoms before adding them to a dish to make sure they haven't turned astringent. The petals may be used to garnish salads, or add to sandwiches, yogurt, or a fish entrée or appetizer. Daylily petals range in flavor from mild to astringent. The darker colored petals tend to have a stronger flavor. Again, taste before adding to a dish. The buds reportedly taste similar to asparagus or green beans and may be used in stir-fries and baked dishes. The petals may be used to add flavor and color to salads.



Daylily petals can flavor and add color to salads; the buds reportedly taste similar to asparagus or green beans, and may be used in stir-fries and baked dishes.

Photos by Jason Miller.

Chrysanthemum (*Chrysanthemum X morifolium*, *Dendranthem X graniflora*) petals range in flavor from mild to strong. Taste, then use accordingly in salads, tea, soups, or as whole flower garnishes for stir-fries and one-pot dishes. Be sure you know the source of these flowers, because nursery stock may have been sprayed with chemicals you don't want included in your meals.



Nasturtium blossoms, leaves and seeds are edible, and can lend their peppery flavor to herb butters, soft cheeses, flavored oils, dressings and vinegars.

Photo by Jason Miller.

Nasturtiums (*Tropaeolum majus*) are easy annuals to grow; they are often used in elementary school garden projects. The entire plant (flowers, leaves and seed pods) are edible. Finely chop the leaves and flowers to make herb butters and soft cheeses, flavored oils, dressings and vinegars, especially those that have honey and fruit tones. Whole, trimmed flowers may be used in salads and on sandwiches or stuffed with soft cheeses and served on crackers. The seed pods may be pickled and used like capers.

Maybe some cool-weather plants in your vegetable garden have bolted in hot weather. The good news is that some of these plants are still tasty. Broccoli, broccoli raab, chives and arugula flowers are all edible. Not surprisingly, you might use these flowers similar as you would the vegetable. Broccoli and raab flowers can be added to pasta, sprinkled on salads, or as part of edible flower confetti. Arugula flowers are still edible after the leaves have become too astringent. Use them to flavor pasta salad, frittatas, grilled vegetable and cheese sandwiches, tomato soup. Chive flowers have a mild, sweet onion flavor. Use them as you would the leaves, such as on baked potatoes, salads, sauces and dips. Flavor soft cheeses, soups, stir-fries and egg dishes.

Varieties of geraniums (*Pelargonium spp.*) are often prefaced with adjectives that seem describe their taste: lemon, mint, chocolate, nutmeg and rose. However, be aware that only the lemon and rose varieties are useful in the kitchen. The pinkish rose blossoms can be used for creamy desserts, like ice cream and custard, or to enhance the flavor of crème fraiche over fresh fruit or a fruit tart. Mix blossoms with sugar, then use the flavored sugar on cookies, pound cake and in tea. This flower can also be successfully candied.

Rose petals have been used in cooking for centuries. The best varieties for your dinner table are the disease-resistant varieties that need the least amount of spraying. Again, avoid spraying chemicals on those plants you may wish to eat. Be aware that the darker the color of the rose, the more likely it will have a strong, metallic taste, which may not be suitable as part of a meal. The lighter varieties tend to have a milder flavor.



Rose petals have been used in cooking for centuries. Choose a lighter-colored variety, which should have a milder taste. Photo by Jason Miller.

Rose petals need a little more preparation than other edible flowers. The white part at the base of the petal should be removed as it can be bitter. The best uses for rose petals are to make jellies, rose water, and flavored vinegar, honey, butters, fruit syrups and sugars.

Some cultures have long histories of dressing up dishes with flowers. With a little research and imagination, entire beds in your landscaping may be both beautiful and edible.

Be sure to consult plant encyclopedias and horticulture resources before eating unfamiliar flowers. If the sources contradict each other, proceed with caution or avoid altogether the questionable flower for culinary purposes. Avoid using lawn and landscaping chemicals on plants intended for your dinner table. Not only will the flavor be compromised, the chemicals may have serious health hazards. This caution also applies to nursery stock plants that may have been sprayed.

Growing your own flowers to create colorful, zesty additions to your meal table is best because you'll know exactly what is going on your dinner plate. Plus, it's more rewarding!