

A Consumer's Guide to Purchasing, Producing, Storing, and Using Edible Flowers

Edible flowers can be used to add color, fragrance, and flavor to salads, soups, entrees, desserts, and drinks. Since the late 1980s, there has been a resurgence in the popularity of edible flowers used by chefs and people entertaining at home. With the variety of edible flowers available, selections of size, shape, and color suitable for any occasion are easy to find.

Edible flower precautions

Consumers should proceed with caution when growing, buying, and eating edible flowers. As with every new food item, slowly introduce edible flowers into your diet to see if you will have an allergic reaction. Consumers with allergies to pollen should proceed with caution before eating any flowers. Also, taste flowers before using them in dishes to insure that the flavor is desirable.

Any edible flower cookbooks or references used for identification should have the following:

- Pictures of the flower/plant
- Description of the flower/plant appearance
- What portion of the flower/plant is edible
- How the flower can be used
- Scientific name (genus and species) for identification. For example, *Tropaeolum majus* is the genus and species for nasturtium. See the Nomenclature fact sheet (will add link) for definitions of a genus and species.

Understanding scientific names is one of the most important keys for using edible flowers. Avoid any cookbook or Web site that does include the genus and species for identification. Many flowers share the same common name, and a non-edible flower could be mistaken for a true edible flower.

Purchasing edible flowers

Certain grocery store produce departments sell edible flower mixtures in rigid plastic containers. Do not eat flowers on plants or in bouquets that have been purchased from nurseries, florists, or garden centers. These flowers may have been sprayed with pesticides and are not intended for consumption.

Edible flower production

Gardeners will find that edible flower production is similar, if not identical, to vegetable production.

- Conduct a soil test to determine soil pH and fertility where the edible flowers will be grown. Contact your county extension office for assistance and to purchase a soil test kit. See www.cas.psu.edu/directory/ for county extension contact information.
- Wait until after the last frost date to transplant seedlings or sow seeds of tender annual varieties.
- Use media, fertilizers, and amendments that are suggested for vegetable production.
- Water plants when necessary.
- Continually deadhead faded or dead flowers to encourage new flowers to grow.
- Alternative pest management strategies must be considered since no pesticides are registered for use on edible flowers. Gardeners will need to scout for pests often and remove them by hand, cut off damaged or infested plant material, or use beneficial insects. **Under no circumstances should a gardener apply a pesticide to their edible flowers that they use on their vegetables or ornamental plants to control pests.**

Harvesting

Gardeners should only harvest flowers from their own garden or from other gardens that have not been sprayed with chemicals.

- Choose flowers that have just fully opened. Compare edible flowers to fruit. They should not be under- or overripe.
- Flowers should be harvested in the morning right after the dew has dried. Flowers are more turgid (full of water) earlier in the day, before heat from the sun increases the flower's temperature. Flowers will be less likely to stick together when placed in containers if the dew has dried.

Storing

After flowers are harvested, they should be stored in a refrigerator and used as soon as possible for best flavor.

- Use a plastic container to store the flowers instead of a plastic bag, as it will be less likely to crush them.
- Place flowers on top of a moist paper towel in the container. The water in the paper towel will increase the humidity and help keep the flowers from wilting.
- If flowers are not dirty or infested with insects, they are considered to be in a ready-to-use condition. If dirt or insects are present, they can be removed gently with a small paintbrush or make-up brush. Flowers can also be dipped in room-temperature water to dislodge debris. Place flowers on a paper towel to dry. When using either method, be especially careful with flowers that have darker colored or sheer/delicate petals. Damage will be more noticeable on these petals than lighter colored or tougher petals. These methods result in less damage to the flowers compared to rinsing them under a stream of water.
- Avoid using a salad spinner to dry flowers. The rotating motion in the spinner may damage certain species with delicate petals.
- Remove stamens, containing pollen, and pistils from flowers before tasting. Pollen may affect the taster's allergies or may distract from flower's flavor.

Preparing flowers for use

With the exception of removing the stamens and pistils, some flowers, including squash blossoms (*Cucurbitis pepo* spp.), nasturtium (*Tropaeolum majus*), and viola (*Viola tricolor*), can be eaten whole. Others need to be prepared before consumption.

- Dianthus (*Dianthus* spp.) and rose (*Rosa* spp.) petals are large enough that they can be cut from the stem. When removing the petals cut off any white or non-colored portion at the base of the petal, which is often bitter tasting.

- Individual florets for flowers such as basil (*Ocimum basilica*) or lavender (*Lavendula angustifolia*) should also be pulled from the stem. Removing these florets will decrease the likelihood of biting into the tough, bitter stem.
- Remove any visible sepal (plant part just under the flower petals that looks like a group of small green leaves) or other green portions of the flowers; they may also have a bitter taste.
- Consult an edible flower cookbook with recipes to determine how individual edible flower should be prepared and eaten.

Suggested Further Reading

- Barash, C.W. 1993. Edible flowers: From garden to palate. Fulcrum Publishing, Golden, CO.
- Belsinger, S. 1991. Flowers in the kitchen: A bouquet of tasty recipes. Interweave press, Loveland, CO.
- Creasy, R. 1999. The edible flower garden. Periplus Editions.
- Kosztolnyik, L. 1996. Selling edible flowers. National Food Merchandiser 17(7):74.
- McVicar, J. 1997. Good enough to eat: Growing and cooking edible flowers. Kyle Cathie Limited, London, England.

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