

A “Starter Kit” of Edible Flowers for the Garden & Table

HGA-00137

Flowers have traditionally been used in cooking by cultures throughout the world. They were very popular in the Victorian era in England, but their popularity then waned. Today, the culinary use of flowers is experiencing a merited resurgence. In general, flowers are added for visual effect rather than for flavor. An edible flower is just what the name implies, a flower or part of the flower that can be eaten. The flowers discussed here range from mild in flavor to robust. Although edible flowers are most popular in fresh salads, new and imaginative uses for the colored petals are being explored that open beautiful and tasty culinary vistas.

Easy to Grow

Many edible flowers are easy to grow. The species discussed here prefer the rich soils and cool seasons of Alaska. Some flowers, such as the prolific nasturtium, are annuals, while others, like roses, are perennials. Edible flowers should be viewed as dual-purpose plants whose flowers are beautiful in the garden and delicious in the kitchen. They are often grown like ornamental flowers, but it is important to note that pesticides commonly used for ornamental flowers may not be labeled for edible uses. Growers should only use products that are labeled safe for use on edible flowers.

Although adequate moisture is important for flower growth, overhead sprinklers can physically damage the delicate petals, and the wet foliage is more susceptible to foliar disease. Consider using drip irrigation, which puts the water directly on



the ground and thus minimizes muddy splashes on the flowers. For more information on drip irrigation, see UAF Cooperative Extension Service publication FGV-00648, *Drip Irrigation for Alaska Gardens*. Mulching garden beds can also help minimize soil splashing on the petals. Mulching materials can include straw, grass clippings or plastic mulches. For more information on choosing and using plastic mulches, see UAF Cooperative Extension Service publication FGV-00647, *Plastic Mulch and Row Covers for Vegetables*.

Harvest the petals when the flowers are in peak condition. Like all produce, the blossoms should be picked while they are cool — for example, during the early morning or late evening — for best storage and highest sugar content. To preserve them for later use, refrigerate the flowers in a plastic wrapping along with a moist paper towel.

Things to Remember

- The best way to get safe, edible flowers is to grow them yourself.
- Not all flowers are edible. Some are poisonous, such as sweet pea, lupine, foxglove, nicotiana, larkspur, lily-of-the-valley and many more. **EAT ONLY FLOWERS YOU KNOW ARE EDIBLE.**
- If you suffer from asthma, hay fever or other allergies, use caution when eating flowers because the pollen may trigger a reaction. Eat flowers sparingly the first time, as you would any new food.
- “Edible” does not mean delicious. Flowers are chosen primarily for their looks, not their taste. For example, all marigolds are edible, but only calendula and signet marigolds are generally considered tasty.
- Never eat flowers from the roadside because of potential contamination.
- Never eat flowers from a florist bouquet. You don’t know the history of the crop and its pest control treatments.
- If pest control is needed, use cultural or integrated pest management (IPM) solutions first. If cultural methods are not adequate, consider using pesticides only if the product is labeled for use on edible flowers. Follow label instructions explicitly.
- Only the petals of most edible flowers should be eaten. Some roses and dianthus have a bitter, white base or heel on the petal that should be removed.



Cooled flowers will stay fresh for several days. If the flowers become limp, you can revitalize them by floating them on ice water for a few moments.

Many edible flowers grow well in containers, including pansies, violas, signet marigolds and most herbs. Nasturtiums are also popular container flowers, but they will not tolerate dry conditions. Yellowing leaves mean they need more frequent watering. Consider placing pots or hanging baskets with edible flowers close to your kitchen door for easy access.

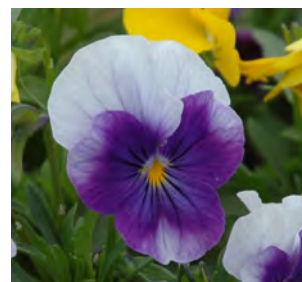
Some common edible flowers for Alaska

Nasturtiums

These popular edible flowers come in a variety of colors, from bright and muted yellow to orange, red and even bicolor blossoms, and they are well-suited for growing in Alaska. Their initially sweet taste is soon followed by a terrific peppery punch. They can be substituted for radishes in salad or added for their visual appeal only. Nasturtium is one of the few edible flowers of which you can eat the leaves as well as the entire flower. The leaves have 10 times the vitamin C found in lettuce and even more zest than the flowers. Nasturtiums can be used in vinegars, butters and garnishes for several dishes, pressed into foods such as homemade tortillas, added to scrambled eggs or crepes, or frozen into ice cubes. Nasturtiums can be sown in the garden when the danger of frost is past, or they can be planted as transplants.

Pansies, violas, and Johnny-jump-ups

These beautiful flowers love our Alaska climate. They are splendid fresh in salads, candied in sugar, frozen in ice cubes or simply used as a garnish. The flavor is described as slightly sweet or winter-greenlike. Some people can’t taste them at all, but they are beautiful in a dark green salad. During a taste test, we noted quite a difference in flavor among varieties of pansies.



Marigolds

All marigolds are edible, but we did not enjoy the flavor of some of the traditional varieties. Although they are quite showy as a garnish, use them sparingly. We did enjoy the Golden Gem and Lemon Gem varieties of signet marigolds (*Tagetes tenuifolia*). They produce large mounds of small yellow or orange flowers. This flower is a beautiful addition to any ornamental garden and produces hundreds of edible flowers. The blossom flavor is best described as bland to slightly spicy or citrus flavored.



Calendulas

Calendula was once known as poor man's saffron because the petals can substitute for the spice. (True saffron comes from the stamens of a crocus flower.) In taste tests, the calendula flower was described as sweet, and it can be sprinkled on salads, soups, pasta or rice dishes. The petals are easy to pick off this large flower. It was the favorite of our crew to nibble on while evaluating the edible flower plots.

Roses

The *Rugosa* varieties are the roses of choice as edible flowers, but all rose petals are edible. If a rose smells good, it will taste good. You can use the petals in jams and jellies, syrups, ice creams and salads.



The rose hip (the round portion of the flower just beneath the petals) is very high in vitamin C and is best picked just after the first frost. There is archaeological evidence of their use as a food during the Stone Age. Rose hips can be halved and dried with the seeds removed. These dried hips can be used in place of raisins in any recipe.



Dianthus

This hardy perennial is a member of the carnation family and does well in Alaska. It has a sweet, clovelike flavor, but the white base of the petal should be removed because it is sometimes bitter. Dianthus can be used in syrups, jams, jellies, vinegars and fruit salads.

Snapdragons

Although this flower grew well and produced showy blossoms, none of our crew enjoyed the flavor. It was noted that the darker flower colors were associated with stronger flavors. Use snapdragon petals sparingly.



Herb flowers

The flowers of many herbs have a taste that is similar to the leaves. Break apart chive florets and sprinkle them on salads, cooked vegetables, casseroles, eggs, potatoes or any place you would use onion. Beautiful pink vinegar can be made with the flowers. Chives are the most commonly used herb flower, but the blossoms of basil, cilantro, dill, fennel, marjoram, mint, oregano, rosemary, sage, thyme and many others can be used in the same way their leafy counterpart would be used.

Vegetable flowers

Broccoli florets have a mild, spicy, broccoli flavor and are delicious in salads and stir-fry. Radish flowers have a distinctive radish bite. The large blossoms of squash and pumpkin are used as garnishes or can be stuffed, fried or sautéed.

Other edible flowers are noted in references but were not evaluated under Alaska conditions.

Some suggested edible flowers include baby's breath, dandelion, day lilies, petunia, impatiens, lilac and yarrow. As with all new foods, one should eat flowers sparingly the first time, and remember that correct identification is key to knowing what flowers are considered edible.

Selected Recipes

Nasturtium salad dressing

Whisk together $\frac{3}{4}$ cup canola oil, $\frac{1}{4}$ cup red wine vinegar (or an edible flower vinegar), three to four minced garlic cloves and blend well. Add $\frac{1}{2}$ cup nasturtium petals and $\frac{1}{4}$ cup snipped chives and florets. Gently blend and add salt and pepper to taste. Serve over salad garnished with nasturtium flowers.

Crystallized pansies and violas

Start with clean flowers that are free of moisture. Leave a length of stem to help you hold the flower; this can be cut off later. Whisk together 1 teaspoon pasteurized powdered egg white and 1 tablespoon warm water until dissolved. Using a small brush, paint the flower petals with the egg white mixture. Cover the petals completely since uncovered areas will wither and discolor. Gently sprinkle with finely ground, granulated sugar (sometimes called bartender's sugar or superfine sugar.) When your flower is completely sugared, lay it on a rack covered with parchment paper; move the flowers occasionally so they don't stick. Place the flowers in a food dehydrator set on low or on a baking sheet in a low-temperature oven (about 150°F) with the door ajar. The drying will take 10 to 36 hours. The crystallized flowers should be stored in a sealed, dry container. Some varieties will store two days; others will keep for several months.

Related Websites

Colorado State Cooperative Extension: www.ext.colostate.edu/pubs/garden/07237.html

Minnesota Extension: www.extension.umn.edu/projects/yardandgarden/ygbriefs/H104edibleflowers.html

North Carolina Extension: www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/hil/hil-8513.html

Iowa State Extension: www.extension.iastate.edu/Publications/RG302.pdf

Calendula petals on cake

Spread calendula petals on the cream cheese icing atop a carrot cake.

Homemade rose water and essential oil

In a large pot, place a clean brick or flat rock. Fill the area around the brick with rose petals and cover with water. Place a small glass dish on top of the brick. On top of the pot, place a stainless steel bowl with ice. Simmer about 3 hours, depending on the number of petals, replacing the ice as needed. The bowl with ice will condense the steam, causing it to drip into the glass dish. The water in the glass dish is the rose water. On top of the rose water will be a layer of oil (the essential oil). These layers can be separated; the water can be used in cooking and the essential oil in potpourri, soaps or lotions.

Chive blossom butter

Snip the florets from 10 large, barely-opened chive flowers (about 2 tablespoons). In a small bowl, mash $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of unsalted butter until it is fairly soft. Slowly incorporate the chive flowers and about 1 tablespoon of chive leaves into the butter. Cover and refrigerate for up to five days or freeze in containers. Use the butter to season cooked vegetables, such as carrots or peas.

ATTRA: <https://attra.ncat.org/attra-pubs/summaries/summary.php?pub=38>

Other Resources

Hole, L. and E.J. Woods. 200. *Herbs and Edible Flowers: Gardening for the Kitchen*. Cananda: Hole's.

The Internet contains a wealth of information on edible flowers and flower recipes. Search under "edible flowers" or be more specific and use a flower name. Using a research-based resource is recommended.

www.uaf.edu/ces or 1-877-520-5211

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