



# Edible Flowers for the Garden & Table

Flowers have traditionally been used in cooking by cultures throughout the world. They were very popular during the Victorian era in England, but their popularity waned until recently. Today, culinary use is experiencing a merited resurgence. In general, flowers are added to dishes for both visual effect and flavor.

An edible flower is just what the name implies, a flower or parts 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, requiring new planting each year; while others, like roses, are perennials, blooming every year. 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 use on edible plants. 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 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, Row Covers and Low Tunnels for Vegetable Production in Alaska.”

Harvest flower 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. Cooled flowers will stay fresh for several days. If

## 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 for the garden 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 an integrated pest management (IPM) approach, which emphasizes the least toxic solutions to pest problems. Look for pests early and regularly and manually remove them if found. Encourage beneficial insects in the garden and provide proper care to minimize favorable pest conditions. If these methods are not adequate, consider using pesticides only if the product is labeled for use on edible flowers. Follow all label instructions explicitly. Remember, the label is the law!
- 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.

the flowers become limp, you can revitalize them by floating them on ice water for a few minutes.

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, and there can be quite a difference in flavor between pansy varieties, though all are beautiful in a green salad.



## Marigolds

All marigolds are edible, although many people do not enjoy the flavor of traditional varieties.

Although they are quite showy as a garnish, use them sparingly. Golden

Gem and Lemon Gem varieties of signet marigolds (*Tagetes tenuifolia*) are the best to include in dishes. They produce large mounds of small yellow or orange flowers and are a beautiful addition to any ornamental garden, producing 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 were used as a substitute for that rare and expensive spice. (True saffron comes from the stamens of a crocus flower.) The calendula flower is 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 and are a favorite to nibble on in the garden.

## 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 is sometimes bitter and should be removed. Dianthus can be used in syrups, jams, jellies, vinegars and fruit salads.

## Snapdragons

Although this flower grows well in Alaska and produces showy blossoms, its flavor might not be enjoyed by everyone. Darker-colored flowers have stronger flavors so are better used for decoration than for flavor.



## Herb flowers

The flowers of many herbs taste similar to their leaves. 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 that their leaves would be used. Chive blossoms can be separated into chive florets and sprinkled on salads, cooked vegetables, casseroles, eggs, potatoes or any dish where you would use chives or onion. In addition, beautiful pink vinegar can be made with chive flowers.

## 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's growing 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.

### 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.

### Culinary salts and flavored sugars

Add savory dried, ground flower petals (nasturtium, calendula, herb flowers) to salt and store in a jar and substitute for plain salt in dishes. Layer fresh, sweet flower petals (lavender, rose, pansies, marigolds, herb flowers) with sugar in a shallow, airtight container for 2 to 3 weeks. Mix sugar and

herbs together then store in plastic bags in the freezer to prevent caking.

### Crystallized pansies and violas

Start with clean flowers, free of moisture. Leave some 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; uncovered areas will wither and discolor. Gently sprinkle with finely ground, granulated sugar (sometimes called superfine sugar.) When the 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.

### Calendula petals on cake

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

### Related Websites

Colorado State Cooperative Extension: <http://extension.colostate.edu/topic-areas/yard-garden/edible-flowers-7-237/>

Minnesota Extension: <https://extension.umn.edu/flowers/edible-flowers>

North Carolina Extension: <https://content.ces.ncsu.edu/choosing-and-using-edible-flowers-ag-790>

Iowa State Extension: [www.extension.iastate.edu/Publications/RG302.pdf](http://www.extension.iastate.edu/Publications/RG302.pdf)

ATTRA Sustainable Agriculture Program, National Center for Appropriate Technology: <https://attra.ncat.org/product/edible-flowers/>

### Other Resources

Hole, L. and E.J. Woods. 2000. *Herbs and Edible Flowers: Gardening for the Kitchen*. Canada: 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](http://www.uaf.edu/ces) or 1-877-520-5211

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