

Please Eat the Daisies!

By Susan Camp

The flowers of most culinary herbs are edible, including basil, chives, rosemary, marjoram and oregano, but other flowers have a place in the kitchen, as well. Nasturtium (*Tropaeolum majus*) buds, leaves, and flowers add peppery flavor to salads and pasta dishes. Lavender (*Lavandula* spp.) blossoms are delicious in ice cream, shortbread, and muffins. Daylily (*Hemerocallis* spp.) buds and flowers can be lightly battered and fried, and crystallized pansy, violet, and rose petals make beautiful garnishes for cakes and other desserts.

The use of fresh flowers in meal preparation has increased in recent years, due, in part, to the number of cooking shows on television and the use of new and different ingredients by chefs in popular restaurants. Edible flowers are available in some grocery stores, although they tend to be expensive and are perishable, so are not always wise purchases.

There are some restrictions and safety issues related to using flowers in cooking. Not all flowers are edible. If you aren't sure you have grown or picked the right plants, don't eat them. Learn the formal, botanical names for plants you are going to consume; sometimes several plants will bear the same common name, depending on the region of the country. Use only pesticide-free plants. If you aren't sure if plants have been treated, don't eat them. Don't use flowers from nurseries or garden centers, and don't pick plants growing on the edge of the road. They may have been sprayed with chemicals and roadside plants are contaminated by dirt and automobile exhaust.

If you or family members suffer from asthma or allergies, either avoid using flowers in cooking or remove the pollen-bearing parts before preparation. Remove the sepals and base from most flowers, except violets and pansies (*Viola* spp.). Never use non-edible flowers as garnish. The University of Florida IFAS Extension publication "Edible Flowers — Quick Facts" provides safety information for cooking with edible flowers. North Carolina State University Extension publication AG-790 "Choosing and Using Edible Flowers" contains similar information and an extensive chart that includes common and botanical names, culture information, color photographs, and culinary uses for each plant listed.

Herb and other flower vinegars generally are safe to make for home use, but oils harbor the possibility of growing *C. botulinum*, the anaerobic bacteria that cause botulism, a potentially fatal food poisoning. It is best to add flowers to the oil just before serving and freeze or store the oil in the refrigerator for no longer than 10 days.

Gather edible flowers in the morning after the dew has dried. Wash them carefully in cool water to remove dust and insects and dry on paper towels. Use the flowers the same day or refrigerate overnight in a plastic bag. Suggested uses of edible flowers abound in articles from many state Extension Agencies and the Royal Horticultural Society.

Stuff squash (*Curcubita* spp.) blossoms with seasoned breadcrumbs and fry or sauté. Blanch sunflower (*Helianthus annuus*) buds and serve with garlic butter. Freeze scented geranium (*Pelargonium* spp.) flowers in ice cubes to flavor drinks. Borage (*Borago officinalis*) is said to add a pleasant cucumber taste to salads.

The Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) publication “Wine Making for the Home Gardener” offers, besides the old-fashioned standbys of dandelion and elder flower wine, several interesting flavoring options, including bee balm (*Monarda didyma*), jasmine (*Jasminum* spp.), and hibiscus (*Hibiscus rosa-sinensis*).

The possibilities for using edible flowers to enhance tasty, attractive dishes are almost endless. And daisies? According to the Royal Horticultural Society the light flavor of the petals of *Bellis perennis* makes a pleasant garnish for salads and cakes.

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