

Edible flowers



Borage flower

Most gardens have at least a few flowers grown for display, but recently there has been a growing awareness that flowers can be a colourful garnish or a tasty treat, and even a source of nutrition.

Words of advice

- Only eat flowers that have been correctly identified as being edible
- Ensure no chemicals have been used in cultivation of the plant
- Introduce flowers into diet slowly and eat sparingly

Daylilies (*Hemerocallis spp*)

Picked as an open flower, daylily petals have a crisp and juicy flavour, especially the nectar filled base. This plant has numerous hybrids with different coloured flowers. Usually the darker coloured flowers tend to leave an unpleasant aftertaste while the lighter coloured flower are sweeter with a flavour akin to asparagus or green beans. If flowers are picked when slightly withered, they can be used to flavour and thicken cooked food. Flowers can also be used to decorate salad. Daylilies can be frozen and kept for up to eight months in the freezer.

Daylilies are an easy to grow herbaceous perennial. They are robust enough for sun or shade and will grow through short grass and can withstand neglect, but they will give the best flowers if grown in reasonable soil in full sun.

Basil (*Ocimum basilicum*)

Basil is usually grown as an annual herb for its leaves. Depending on the variety of basil grown the flowers are white, pale pink, or a subtle lavender. The flavour of the

flower is milder, but similar to the leaves. So don't despair if your basil plants start flowering in the summer and early autumn. Simply pick the flowering tops as soon as they open, and sprinkle the flowers over salad or pasta and add to soups and pesto. Basil requires a rich well-drained soil. It needs a warm sunny position, with protection from the wind. It will thrive grown in pots on a sunny windowsill, or in a greenhouse.

Common daisy (*Bellis perennis*)

Daisy buds and petals give a pleasant, slightly sour flavour to salads. The buds can also be pickled in vinegar and used as a substitute for capers. Daisy flowers are best picked in spring and summer thereby prolonging flowering and producing further crops.

This hardy perennial can be found in your lawn and will grow successfully in sun or partial shade.

Pinks (*Dianthus spp*)

Flowers taste similar to spicy cloves. They should be picked when first open and the white base removed.

They can be added to salads, fruit pies and sandwiches, candied, pickled in vinegar and made into a syrup. Pinks, a hardy perennial are best grown in a sunny, sheltered, well-drained position in a poor soil. Easily propagated from seed and stem cuttings. To grow in containers, window boxes and tubs use a very free draining compost.

Courgette, squash, marrow and pumpkin (*Cucurbita spp*)

These large yellow flowers have a mild vegetative flavour. Both male and female flowers can be used in cooking. Some cooks prefer to use female courgette flowers as young courgette fruits can be picked with the female flowers still attached. Also the plant will continue to produce more courgettes.

Courgette flowers can be coated in batter and then deeply fried. They can also be stuffed, steamed or baked. Grow best in full sun. Start seeds indoors in spring, then plant out when the soil is warm and there is no danger of frost.

Nasturtium (*Tropaeolum majus*)

A deliciously spicy-peppery tasting flower. The colourful flowers, leaves and seed pods of this annual plant are edible. The leaves have a taste similar to cress. Pick flowers throughout the summer for immediate use. The fat green seed pods can be pickled and used as an alternative to capers. Nasturtiums can be added to salads, pasta, meat dishes and vinaigrettes.

Sow seeds in situ in spring. May also maintain itself through self-seeding. Prefers full sun and a light well-drained soil. Grows well in containers but should not be fed if flowers are required. Keep well watered in hot weather.

Lavender (*Lavendula spp*)

This multipurpose flower can be used in jams, jellies, ice cream, biscuits and vinegar. The flowers can also be crystallised, added to salads or used to make a tea. Flowers are best picked when they first open, before seeds begin to form.

An evergreen perennial shrub which needs a neutral to alkaline soil in an open sunny position. Plants become woody with age and should be replaced every 3 – 4 years, but can be pruned back immediately after flowering in order to maintain vigour.

Chives (*Allium schoeono-prasum*)

The purple onion-like flowers from this perennial herb provide an oniony, but not overpowering flavour. Harvest as flowers are just opening. Young developing seed-heads are slightly stronger in taste. Frequent picking will encourage flowering to continue until the first frost. Flowers can be used to garnish salads and added to sauces. Chives are among the most versatile edible flower in savory cooking. Best grown in rich, well drained soil in full sun, but also performs well in pots. Must be kept well watered. Propagated from seeds and by splitting clumps in mid spring.

Sweet violet (*Viola odorata*)

Has scented small blue or white flowers. It produces the only edible flower available in winter and early spring. They have a fresh flavour and are used to flavour and colour confectionery. The flowers can also be used as a thickener in soup and stews and make a tasty, interesting garnish for salads, fruit salads and desserts. Sweet violets thrive in a moderately heavy rich soil in a semi-shaded spot. Do well in containers but need to be placed in a cool position throughout the summer and must not be given heat during the winter.

Pansy (*Viola x wittrockiana*, *Viola tricolor*)

Pansy flowers, which come in a huge range of colours, have a mild fresh flavour, or a slightly grassy taste, depending on the pansy variety and how much of the flower is eaten. The petals are very mild in taste but the whole flower tastes much stronger. Use pansies to garnish cocktails, desserts, soups and fruit salads.

Pot marigold (*Calendula officinalis*)

Pot marigolds produce orange or yellow flowers, which come in a range of flavours: spicy, bitter, tangy or peppery. Petals can be sprinkled on soups, pasta, salads and rice. Powdered petals, also known as poor man's saffron, can be added to give a golden hint to herb butter, spreads, soups and scrambled egg. Pick flowers just as they open in summer for fresh use and for drying.

Grows in a wide range of soil, but does prefer a sunny position. Direct sow seeds in spring, after the last frost. Deadheading encourages a continuous harvest of flowers.

Dandelion (*Taraxacum officinale*)

This common weed has a yellow flower that tastes of honey if picked young. It turns bitter when mature. The flowers can be made into tea, wine and beer. They can also be used to garnish a salad. When serving a rice dish use dandelion petals like confetti over the rice.

Bee balm or Bergamot (*Monarda didyma*)

This hardy perennial gets its common name from the bees love of its nectar. The red flowers are a mixture of interesting flavours, ranging from citrusy and sweet to hot and minty. Can be used to make tea and as an ingredient for cakes.

Prefers a moist rich soil. Tolerates partial shade to full sun. Can be grown from seed or root division.

Rose (*Rosa spp*)

The Rugosa roses have large single flowers with the most flavoursome petals of all the roses. They are followed a close second by old roses, damask and gallica rose petals are particularly delicious. On selecting petals from hybrid roses remember that

only fragrant roses have flavorsome petals and that some leave an aftertaste, so sample a petal before taking it into the kitchen. Ensure when harvesting petals that the whitish petal base is removed, as it is sour. Rose petals can be used to make jam, vinaigrettes, sauces and meat dishes.

Roses grow best in a rich, well-drained soil in full sun.

French marigold (*Tagetes spp*)

An annual with a taste like spicy tarragon. Remove the white part from the end of the petal where it was attached to the flower, as it can be very bitter. Marigold petals can be dried in a similar way to calendula (pot marigold).

Lilac (*Syringa vulgaris*)

The white or purple flowers, have a delicate 'floral' flavour. Add to yogurt or use the flowers as an attractive garnish. The flowers are also very tasty deep fried. This familiar shrub is very hardy and easy to grow.

Sage (*Salvia officinalis*)

A perennial herb with mauve-blue flowers in midsummer. The flowers have a milder taste than the sage leaf. They can be used in pesto, salads, soups and with fish dishes. Sage grows best in full sun and prefers a light soil. Can be grown from seed or cuttings in the spring.

Borage (*Borago officinalis*)

An annual herb with bright blue-purple star shaped flowers that taste mildly of cucumber. The flowers can be tossed in a salad or floated on summer beverages. Also excellent as a garnish for both sweet and savory dishes and on iced soups. The flowers can also be crystallized for cake decorations.

Chervil (*Anthriscus cerefolium*)

Flowers are a delicate white with an aniseed flavour. Chervil's flavour is lost very easily so sprinkle on salads or vegetables just before serving. Chervil flowers can also be used to flavour cakes.

Grown as an annual from seed in spring.

Sprouting broccoli, cauliflower, mustard (*Brassica Spp*)

If you don't get around to picking all your brassica crops the result will be bright yellow flowers. The small yellow flowers have a mild spiciness comparable to a mild brassica flavour. They are delicious in salads or in stir-fries.

Further sources of information:

- The RHS Encyclopedia of Herbs & their uses Deni Bown ISBN 1-4053-0059-0
- Jekka's Complete Herb Book ISBN 1-85626-349-5
- Edible Flowers from Garden to Palate, Cathy Wilkinson Barash ISBN 1-55591-246-X