

Edible Flowers: Adding Color and Flavor to Your Plate

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So you're wondering why you would want to eat flowers....actually, you probably already do. Broccoli and cauliflower are both technically unopened flower buds. (Those of you who garden will attest to the cute little blooms that arise when you let these "vegetables" sit for too long in the garden). For once, I'm not going to list all the wonderful nutrients that these foods hold-- there are a few things, like Vitamin C in rose hips, dandelions and marigolds as well as Vitamin A in dandelions. Instead, let's just agree that color, visual interest and taste alone are reasons enough to eat flowers. (If you happen to get some with lots of pollen, that's a good thing as well, so long as you're not allergic, since pollen has lots of vitamins and minerals.)

Flowers have been used for food and medicine since human kind first started eating. In the past, there were numerous medicinal concoctions that included flowers, many of which are now considered poisonous; we won't discuss those. Likewise, it's important that you only eat flowers that you're sure haven't been sprayed with pesticides, as it's incredibly difficult to wash it all off (avoid those from commercial florists, as they're doused in chemicals. An exception would be small organic growers such as Lilies and Lavender, a Doylestown-based grower who sells at the Wrightstown and Doylestown farmers markets). Also, don't assume that if the deer and your dog will eat it that it's good for humans; most of the time it's true, but not always. It's best to start with a few varieties and work your way up.

Simple ideas with flowers include using them as garnishes (and eating them). Larger blooms such as tulip blossoms (with the stamens removed) make wonderful containers for chicken salad; also consider scoops of fruit sorbet in gladiolus flowers. Even simpler is to add whatever blooms you have to a green salad; don't use too many different varieties and make sure that they're not the least bit wilted. (Once the flowers are picked, wash in a bowl of cool water and dry thoroughly; refrigerate between damp paper towels til ready to use).

Another idea is to make flower butters or flower vinegar to use as condiments. For flower butter, get good quality organic butter, soften it at room temperature and add finely chopped flower petals. Usually 2 tablespoons of flowers to ½ cup of butter is the right amount. For flower vinegars, simply fill canning jars ½ full with flower blossoms, then add rice vinegar or white wine vinegar to the jar, leaving ½ inch "head room" at the top. Seal and place in a sunny window for several weeks; at that point, strain the vinegar into clean jars and store in a cool dark place.

So where do you start? Garlic and chive blossoms are both great in salads and make superb vinegars and butters. Arugula flowers are not as spicy as the salad green, but add interest to a salad or a goat cheese spread. When your basil grows too fast and you can't dead-head it, use the blossoms for a slightly less assertive flavor than the leaves. (Oregano and marjoram blossoms also serve this function). Nasturtiums are perhaps my favorite, as they have a spicy, peppery flavor. In addition to use as a salad ingredient, use them as containers for guacamole as appetizers. Borage blossoms are not only beautiful but also have a faint cucumber taste; add them to any yogurt-based cucumber dip.

There are hundreds of blossoms to try; for more information, go to: <http://whatscookingamerica.net/EdibleFlowers/EdibleFlowersMain.htm> or look for Flowers in the Kitchen by Susan Belsinger. Just be sure to spend more time in your garden and make your plate full of color and life!