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Using Edible Flowers

by Ben Haggard

Edible flowers are a great way to expand the number of useful and ornamental species in the permaculture landscape. Many edible flowers are also used by bees, wasps and other beneficial insects, and some are important hummingbird plants. I find that salads and other dishes that feature fresh, edible flowers can have a slightly intoxicating effect, perhaps attributable to concentrations of nutrients in their parts. Or maybe it is the delirious pleasure of sitting down to a feast of vivid colors and textures that makes me giddy. Whatever the cause, as a serious lover of eating, I would no more live without edible flowers than I would without fresh herbs—or fresh air.

Here are some of my favorite edible flowers and ways to use them. Among perennials, possibly the best are the daylilies (*Hemerocallis* spp.). Daylilies are widely adapted and virtually effortless to grow in northern New Mexico, requiring only a little supplemental water and preferring a little shade. Recently we planted some daylilies in a constructed wetland where they are



hard at work converting wastewater into garnishes. (It is important to remember that many plants, some of them extremely poisonous, go by the name lily. Always be sure you know what you are working with before you eat flowers.)

Nearly all culinary herbs have flowers which are useful. Lavender makes wonderful jellies and ice cream. Rosemary, thyme, savory, basil and oregano flowers can all be used in much the same way that the leaves are, especially in recipes that don't require cooking. Dill flowers are popularly used in pickling but are also nice in salads. Anise hyssop has a delightful fragrance and taste. *Monarda*, or bee balm, makes an elegant garnish. I am also fond of arugula (*Eruca vesicaria*), sometimes known as roquette or rocket. This little mustard sows itself throughout my garden twice a year, providing abundant crops of peppery leaves followed by spires of pale yellow flowers.

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All members of the genus *Viola* have edible flowers; most have edible leaves as well. I regularly grow violets, pansies and Johnny-Jump-Ups and use them throughout the growing season in salads and as garnishes. A chocolate cake sprinkled with powdered sugar and liberally garnished with bouquets of dark red pansies is exactly the kind of trouble I like to get into. I suppose macrobiotic tofu pudding would probably also benefit considerably by the presence of a violet nosegay—not that I would know from personal experience. *Violas* come in an amazing range of color and should be in every garden. Find a moist, shady corner for them.

Another useful genus is *Dianthus*. All members of the genus are edible, and many are fragrant. Pinks, carnations and Sweet Williams are included in this diverse genus. Many *dianthus* are reasonably drought tolerant, particularly in a rich, well-mulched soil. Some are tiny alpinists, preferring well-drained scree soils. Although I will admit a slight prejudice against Sweet Williams and some of the more fluorescent annual color forms in my garden, I have never met a *dianthus* I didn't like on my dinner plate.

Roses, whose petals are used in salads, as garnish, candied or distilled into rose waters, are variable and widely adapted. New Mexico is ideal rose growing country for a number of species, including our native *Rosa woodsii*, and *Rosa foetida* of Persian origin. I am also fond of *Rosa rugosa* whose beautiful flowers are followed by large, easily cleaned rose hips for use in winter teas.

Many alliums have nice edible flowers. My favorites are chives and garlic chives (*Allium schoenoprasum* and *A. tuberosum*) and the golden yellow blossoms of *Allium moly*. Another excellent candidate for the salad is *Allium cernuum*, a pink nodding onion native to the Ponderosa woodlands surrounding Santa Fe. I find this makes a perfectly well-adapted understory plant under pinyon and juniper scrub.

Several species of chrysanthemum are regularly eaten, including the standard garden mums. *C. leucanthemum*, or oxeye daisy, is a common garden and roadside weed in this area and is also edible. Another chrysanthemum, *C. coronarium*, is sold as Shungiku or Chop Suey Greens. It is primarily grown for its sweet-tasting leaves, but the flowers are perfectly acceptable. I am currently encouraging it to become a self-sowing permanent member of my garden family. At least one chrysanthemum, *C. pyrethrum*, the pyrethrum daisy, is poisonous, so I would not recommend jumping to conclusions about the edibility of every member of this genus.

Two annuals that I always include in my edible garden are bachelor's buttons (*Centaurea cyananthus*) and pot marigolds (*Calendula officinalis*.) These are both easy to grow, self-sow readily, and are lively additions to salads and other dishes. Borage is another easily grown annual with edible flowers and leaves. Scarlet runner beans and garden peas (not sweetpeas, which are poisonous) both have edible

flowers. Squash blossoms have long been used in cooking, stuffed with cheese, rolled in a light batter and fried. But perhaps the most popular edible flower of all is the nasturtium, with its gorgeous colors and snappy flavor.

I also like the *salvias*, especially garden (culinary) sage, with its tubular purple flowers and the crimson blossoms and heavenly fragrance of pineapple sage. Another beautiful garden subject is the biennial clary sage (*S. sclarea*) which is traditionally used in Clary wine. I have never tried this beverage, and I find the smell of the leaves off-putting. But the flower is so beautiful at twilight that I am sure I won't be able to resist much longer.

Several shrubs and trees produce edible blossoms. Redbuds (*Cercis* spp.) produce a sweet, crunchy blossom. Elderberry blossoms (specifically *Sambucus caerulea*) are used to flavor beverages and a traditional German pancake. (Some people are allergic to elderberry blossoms, so use caution in serving them.) I was recently brought an apple cider from England flavored with elderflowers that was delicious and like nothing I had ever tasted before. Lilac and apple blossoms are delicate and delicious candied. Yucca blossoms can have a slightly bitter taste and are used raw, stuffed or stir-fried.

This list by no means exhausts all the possibilities. (After all, artichokes and broccoli are just unopened flower buds.) And many useful edible plants have beautiful flowers. I have never subscribed to the belief that a functional garden has to be dreary or that the food we grow for ourselves needs to be drab or pedestrian. I believe that permaculture is compelling because it offers a higher quality of life, simpler and at the same time richer. Like sunwarmed fruit just picked from the tree, or wild collected mushrooms and strawberries, edible flowers harvested from my garden minutes before I sit down to dinner are the sort of luxury I could not possibly afford to buy. But these extraordinary luxuries are abundantly available for a minimal investment of time and energy. ♦

For more information on cooking with edible flowers:

Flower Cookery—The Art of Cooking with Flowers, Mary MacNicol. Fleet Press, New York, 1967

Flowers in the Kitchen, Susan Belsinger. Interweave Press, Loveland, CO
Rose Recipes from Olden Times, Eleanor Sinclair Rohde. Dover Books, New York

The Beautiful Food Garden, Kate Rogers Gessert. Storey Communications, Pownal, VT

Cooking from the Garden, Rosalind Creasy. Sierra Club Books.

The Moosewood Restaurant Kitchen Garden, Hirsch. Simon and Schuster, New York

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