

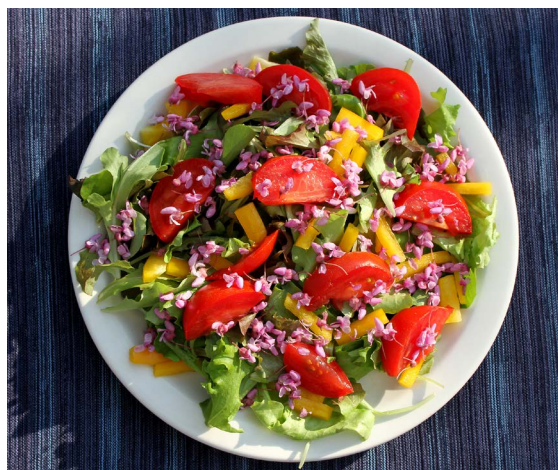


Choosing and Using Edible Flowers

NC STATE
EXTENSION

CHOOSING AND USING EDIBLE FLOWERS

Enjoy the flavor, color, and texture that flowers can bring to food.



Debbie Roos, NC Cooperative Extension

Flowers have traditionally been used in many types of cooking: European, Asian, East Indian, Victorian English, and Middle Eastern. Early American settlers also used flowers as food. Today, there is a renewed interest in edible flowers for their taste, color, and fragrance. Many herbal flowers have the same flavor as their leaves, though others, such as chamomile and lavender blossoms, have a subtler flavor.

EDIBLE FLOWERS AT A GLANCE

- Identify flowers and confirm they are not poisonous prior to eating.
- Consume only flowers that have been grown:
 - with either no pesticides or only pesticides labeled for edible crops; and
 - without the application of animal manure to the surrounding soil in the past four months.
- Harvest at peak bloom and use quickly for best flavor.
- Introduce new varieties of flowers into the diet slowly to screen for allergic reactions.
- Vary the ways you prepare edible flowers: fresh, cooked, candied, frozen, dried, or preserved in oils or vinegars.
- Use only edible flowers as garnishes to food.
- Enjoy the flavor, color, and texture that flowers can bring to food.

Cautions

Not all flowers are edible! Some are poisonous, others may have been exposed to viral or fungal pathogens through the use of animal manures as fertilizers, and still others may have been sprayed with pesticides not approved for plants intended for consumption. An extensive list of poisonous plants can be found at: plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/category/poisonous-plants.

Eat flowers only if you are certain they are edible. Avoid flowers that have been exposed to pathogens like those found in untreated manure. Flowers purchased from a florist, garden center, or nursery should be specifically labeled as edible; otherwise, they may have been treated with ornamental pesticides that are unsafe for use on food crops. Make certain that any pesticides used were approved for plants that will be consumed and that the application instructions have been followed carefully. Pesticides for use on fruits and vegetables have undergone extensive testing to determine the waiting

Avoid flowers:

- grown in soil fertilized with untreated animal manure within four months prior to harvest;
- grown on the roadside;
- purchased at a florist, garden center, or nursery unless labeled as edible; or
- that may have been sprayed with pesticides not labeled for use on food.



potential residues on food. A partial list of edible flowers can be found in Table 1 and in the Extension Gardener Toolbox at plants.ces.ncsu.edu/find_a_plant/ using the “edible” flower value filter.

It’s best to introduce flowers into your diet one type at a time and in small quantities. If you have hay fever, asthma, or allergies, do not eat flowers since many allergies are due to sensitivity to the pollen of specific plants.

Growing Edible Flowers

There are many types of beautiful edible flowers. They grow on annuals, biennials, perennials, trees, shrubs, and vines.

Annual flowers complete their life cycle—from seed, to vegetative plant, to bloom, to setting seed, to death of the plant—in one growing season. Most annuals need to be replanted each year, but others easily re-sow themselves. Their seed is scattered by wind, weather, and wildlife to “volunteer” the next season when conditions are favorable. Calendula and Johnny jump-ups are two edible flowers that are easy to grow and readily reseed. Gardeners love annuals for their riotous colors. They perform quickly, especially if transplants are used, and provide relatively long periods of bloom. At the end of an annual’s growing season, the entire plant can be put in the compost pile and something else can take its place.

Biennials are typically planted in the fall and complete their growing season the following spring.

Perennial plants live more than two years and, once established, bloom each year. Some die back to the ground in their off-season; others retain foliage year-round. Perennials

require more maintenance than annuals. They may need to be cut back during their off-season and divided and replanted as they increase in size. Some of their blooms are tall or heavy enough to require staking. Unlike annuals, which have a lengthy flowering period, most perennials display peak blossoms for a two- or three-week period.

Vines can be an annual or, like shrubs and trees, grow for many years, flowering each year.

Growing edible flowers is essentially the same as growing flowers for ornamental purposes, except that only pesticides approved for edible crops are used. Most flowers require a nutrient rich, well-drained soil with a pH around 5.5 to 6.5. Use the directions in “A Gardener’s Guide to Soil Testing,” found at content.ces.ncsu.edu/a-gardeners-guide-to-soil-testing, to conduct a soil test. For more information, visit the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services’ website on Soil Testing at www.ncagr.gov/agronomi/sthome.htm. Amend your planting bed as recommended based on the results of your test. For more information on soil testing, contact your local N.C. Cooperative Extension center by visiting www.ces.ncsu.edu/local-county-center.

Use a 2- to 3-inch layer of mulch to reduce weeds, conserve soil moisture, maintain uniform soil temperatures, and reduce the amount of soil splashed onto the plant during heavy rain. During the growing season, from spring through fall, most plants will need 1 inch of water each week. If rainfall is inadequate, provide needed irrigation. If possible, avoid overhead sprinklers because moisture on the leaf surface for extended periods of time can increase the chances of disease development. Irrigate with a soaker hose or drip irrigation. Many edible flowers can be successfully grown in containers.



a refrigerator. Damp paper towels placed in the plastic bag will help maintain high humidity.

Using Edible Flowers

To insure safety and best flavor, use the following simple practices. Avoid pollen, which can affect the flavor and may cause an allergic reaction in some people, by removing all parts of the flower except the petals. Also remove the bitter white base of the petals from flowers such as chrysanthemums, dianthus, marigolds, and roses.

Use fresh edible flowers as a garnish or include in a salad. Fry squash flowers in light batter or cornmeal. Cook flowers in stir fry dishes or stuff and bake them. Add minced flowers to cheese spreads, herbal butters, pancakes, crepes, and waffles.

Avoid using chemical pest control, if possible. Handpick harmful insects from the plant instead of spraying. Promote beneficial insects, such as lady beetles and green lacewings, which can help decrease insect pest populations. Growing a variety of flowers provides diversity to support a healthy beneficial insect population and keep pest problems low. Many gardeners locate their edible flower gardens away from other plants to avoid chemical spray drift.

To prolong the bloom period, remove spent blossoms weekly. Use Table 1 to help plan for year-round color and interest in your garden and your menu.

Harvesting Flowers







Flavor can vary with growing conditions and cultivars. Conduct a taste test before harvesting large amounts of a particular flower. Flowers should be picked in the cool of the day, after the dew has evaporated. For maximum flavor, harvest flowers at their peak. Avoid flowers that are not fully open or that are past their prime. To maintain maximum freshness, keep flowers cool after harvest. Long-stem flowers should be placed in a container of water. Short-stemmed flowers, such as borage and orange blossoms, should be harvested within three to four hours of use, placed in a plastic bag, and stored in

Preserving Edible Flowers

Edible flowers can be candied; frozen in ice cubes to be added to beverages; made into jellies, jams, teas, or wines; and included in vinegars for cooking, marinades, or salad dressings. Edible flowers can also be dried for future use and stored in an airtight container in a cool dark place.








Table 1. Edible Flowers

Common and Botanical Names	Image	Flavor	Color	Bloom Season	Height	Form	Sun	Comments
Anise hyssop <i>Agastache foeniculum</i>		Anise, licorice, sweet	Lilac	Summer, fall	12"–24"	P	F/P	Use as a seasoning, in tea, or as potpourri.
Apple, Crabapple <i>Malus</i>		Floral	White to pink	Spring	10'–20'	T	F	Eat in moderation because flowers contain cyanide precursors.
Artichoke <i>Cynara cardunculus</i> (<i>Scolymus</i> Group)		Nutty	Purple	Summer, fall	3'–4'	B	F	Use flowers to make tea.
Arugula <i>Eruca versicaria</i> <i>subsp. sativa</i>		Spicy	White	Summer, fall	6"–12"	A	F/P	Once flowers form, the leaves become bitter. Sow weekly for continuous harvest.
Basil <i>Ocimum basilicum</i>		Spicy	White, pale pink	Summer, fall	20"–24"	A	F/P	Herb. Many varieties.
Bachelor's button <i>Centaurea cyanus</i>		Vegetal	White, pink, blue	Summer	12"–30"	A	F	The tiny green leaves just below the flower are bitter.

Form: A= Annual; B=Biennial; P=Perennial; V=Vine; S=Shrub; T=Tree






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Table 1. Edible Flowers (continued)

Common and Botanical Names	Image	Flavor	Color	Bloom Season	Height	Form	Sun	Comments
Bee balm <i>Monarda didyma</i>		Minty, citrus, sweet, hot	Wide range	Summer	2'–4'	P	F/P	Attracts hummingbirds and butterflies; spreads rapidly.
Begonia <i>Begonia</i>		Citrus. Slight bitter aftertaste.	White, pink, red, orange, yellow	Summer	6"–18"	A	P	Eat raw or cooked in sauces.
Borage <i>Borago officinalis</i>		Cucumber	Blue	Summer	1'–3'	A	F	Nice in combination with nasturtium. Use sparingly—may have diuretic effect.
Broccoli <i>Brassica officinalis</i>		Spicy	Yellow	Summer	2'–3'	A	F	If you are unable to harvest broccoli when the heads are compact, you can still enjoy the flowers, though the rest of the plant becomes bitter once the flowers develop.
Calendula <i>Calendula officinalis</i>		Slightly bitter, tangy, peppery	Yellow, orange	Spring	15"–18"	A	F	Attracts butterflies. Good cut flower. Reseeds. Adds color to salads. Use as a garnish in lieu of saffron. Makes a beautiful yellow dye.



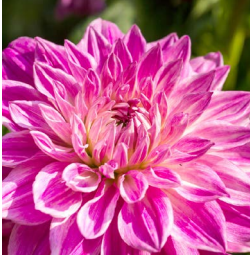


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Common and Botanical Names	Image	Flavor	Color	Bloom Season	Height	Form	Sun	Comments
Carnation <i>Dianthus caryophyllus</i>		Bland or bitter	Red, pink, white, yellow	Fall, winter, spring	12"–14"	P	F	Good cut flower. Fragrant.
Cauliflower <i>Brassica oleracea subsp. Botrytis</i>		Spicy	Yellow	Summer	2'–3'	A	F	Start from transplants; cauliflower are more sensitive to cold than other plants in the cabbage family.
Chamomile, English <i>Chamaemelum nobile</i>		Sweet apple	White	Summer, fall	1'–2'	P	F	Herb. Drink no more than one cup of tea per day; contains thujone. Ragweed sufferers may be allergic to chamomile. Sweet fragrance. Calming agent. Do not use if pregnant.
Chervil <i>Anthriscus cerefolium</i>		Herbal, parsley, faint licorice	White	Summer	1'–2'	A	P	Herb. Use to season poultry, seafood, and vegetables. Add to omelets, salads, and soups.
Chicory <i>Cichorium intybus</i>		Herbal, endive; can be bitter	Blue	Summer	4'–6'	P	F	Eat raw in salads. Brew coffee substitute from root.







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Table 1. Edible Flowers (continued)

Common and Botanical Names	Image	Flavor	Color	Bloom Season	Height	Form	Sun	Comments
Chives, onion <i>Allium schoeonoprasum</i>		Onion, strong, can be overwhelming	Lavender-pink	Summer, fall	6"–12"	P	F/P/N	Herb. Avoid eating whole flower. Use as a garnish.
Chives, garlic <i>Allium tuberosum</i>		Onion, strong, can be overwhelming	White	Summer, fall	12"–18"	P	F	Herb. Avoid eating whole flower. Use as a garnish.
Chrysanthemum <i>Chrysanthemum x morifolium</i>		Mild	Yellow, white	Spring, summer	24"–36"	P	F	Use the florets; remove the bitter, white base of the petal. Used to make a sweet drink in Asia and rice wine in Korea.
Cilantro/ Coriander <i>Coriandrum sativum</i>		Milder than leaf, citrus overtones	White	Summer, fall	18"–24"	A	F	Herb. Sow every week for continual harvest; entire plant is edible.
Daisy, English <i>Bellis perennis</i>		Mildly bitter	White, pink, purple	Summer	6"–8"	P	F	Both white "petals" and yellow centers are flowers. Eat raw in salads and sandwiches or cooked in tea and soups.






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Common and Botanical Names	Image	Flavor	Color	Bloom Season	Height	Form	Sun	Comments
Dandelion <i>Taraxacum officinale</i>		Young flowers—sweet, honey-like Mature flowers—bitter	Yellow	Summer, fall	2"–6"	P	F	Flowers again soon after picking. Use in dandelion wine, jam, and salads. Root is a coffee substitute.
Daylily <i>Heemerocallis</i>		Asparagus or zucchini	Wide range	Summer	12"–36"	P	F/P	May act as a diuretic or laxative; eat in moderation. Fresh or dried. Use in soup and many Chinese dishes.
Dianthus <i>Dianthus</i>		Sweet or spicy clove flavor	Pink, white, red	Spring, fall, winter	10"–20"	P	F	Remove the bitter, narrow base of the petals. Good cut flower. Fragrant.
Dill <i>Anethum graveolens</i>		Herbal	Yellowish-green	Summer, fall	3'–5'	A	F	Herb. Reseeds. Cook with salmon, borscht, fish, and soups. Add to pickles; mince in butter.
Elderberry <i>Sambucus canadensis</i>		Sweet	White	Spring	6'–12'	T	F/P	Do not wash flowers since it removes much of the flavor. Make a syrup to use in drinks, marmalade, yogurt, and desserts.
Fennel <i>Foeniculum vulgare</i>		Sweet, mildly anise, licorice	Yellow-green	Summer	4'–5'	A/B/P	F	Normally grown as an annual. Use in egg and fish dishes.






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Table 1. Edible Flowers (continued)

Common and Botanical Names	Image	Flavor	Color	Bloom Season	Height	Form	Sun	Comments
Geraniums, scented <i>Pelargonium</i>		Similar to the scent of the leaves	Wide range	Varies	12"–24"	P	F/P	Use in herbal butters.
Gladiolus <i>Gladiolus</i>		Mild	Various	Summer	2'–6'	P	F	Best as a garnish or a container for dip or spread.
Grape Hyacinth <i>Muscari atlanticum</i>		Grape, bitter	Blue, pink	Spring	12"	P	F	A bulb in the lily family.
Hibiscus <i>Hibiscus rosa-sinensis</i>		Mildly citrus	Rose, red	Summer	8'–10'	S	F	Showy edible garnish. Use in salads and tea.
Hollyhock <i>Alcea rosea</i>		Slightly bitter	White, pink, red	Late spring, summer, fall	36"–72"	A/B/P	F/P	Showy edible garnish or container for dip.






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Common and Botanical Names	Image	Flavor	Color	Bloom Season	Height	Form	Sun	Comments
Honeysuckle <i>Lonicera japonica</i>		Sweet	White to pale yellow	Summer	15'–30'	V/P	F/P/N	Japanese honeysuckle is an exotic invasive species and should not be cultivated. Do not use flowers from other types of honeysuckle.
Hyssop <i>Hyssopus officinalis</i>		Intense flavor, bitter	Blue, Pink, White	Summer	3'–5'	P	P	Herb. Use moderately. Use to flavor liqueur.
Johnny-jump-up <i>Viola tricolor</i>		Wintergreen; petals have little flavor unless the green sepals are included	Purple and yellow, white, multicolored	Spring	4"–6"	A	F	Contains saponins and may be toxic in large amounts. Anti-inflammatory effect and contains antioxidants.
Lavender <i>Lavendula</i>		Intense, sweet, perfumed flavor	Lavender, white	Summer	24"	P	F	Herb. Use sparingly; lavender oil may be poisonous. Use as a condiment, in salads, and in dressings. Flowers can be candied. Lavender sugar. Blend with black or green teas, incorporate into goat-milk cheeses, cook into a syrup, or bake in scones and marshmallows.
Lilac <i>Syringa vulgaris</i>		Wide variation—from no flavor to green and herbaceous to lilac	Lavender, pink, purple	Spring	4'–15'	S	F	Cut off spent blooms and prune back to a set of leaves each year to ensure abundant flowering the next year.


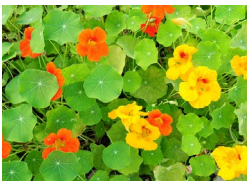



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Table 1. Edible Flowers (continued)

Common and Botanical Names	Image	Flavor	Color	Bloom Season	Height	Form	Sun	Comments
Linden <i>Tilia</i>		Honey-like	White	Summer	60'–70'	T	F	Frequent consumption of linden flower tea can cause heart damage.
Lovage <i>Levisticum officinale</i>		Celery	White, yellow	Summer	3'–4'	P	S/P	Use in salads, soups, broth.
Marigold <i>Tagetes</i>		Bitter, spicy, herbal	Yellow, orange	Spring, summer	18"–36"	A	F	'Lemon Gem' and 'Tangerine Gem' are quite flavorful. Remove the bitter, white base of the petal. May be harmful if eaten in large amounts. Use in tea, to color foods, and as a substitute for tarragon.
Marjoram <i>Origanum majorana</i>		Sweet, spicy	Pale pink	Summer	8"	P	F	Use in soups, stews, dressings, and sauces.
Mint <i>Mentha</i>		Minty. Each type of mint has its own unique flavor.	White, lavender, pink	Summer	18"	P	F/P/N	Herb. Spreads rampantly; consider growing in a pot. Use fresh or dried in teas, beverages, jellies, syrups, candies, ice creams, lamb dishes, and mint sauce.





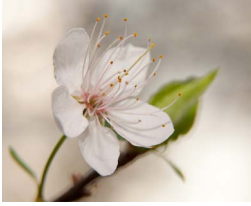

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Common and Botanical Names	Image	Flavor	Color	Bloom Season	Height	Form	Sun	Comments
Mustard <i>Brassica</i>		Mustard, hot	Yellow	Spring	30"–45"	A	F	Mustard was one of the first domesticated crops. Flower buds begin to grow five weeks after the seed emerges, and the yellow petals appear seven to ten days later.
Nasturtium <i>Tropaeolum majus</i>		Spicy, peppery	Wide range	Spring, summer	10"–18" or vine	A	F	Good cut flower; reseeds, fragrant. Use in salads. Use seeds as a caper substitute.
Okra <i>Abelmoschus esculentus</i>		Mild, sweet, slightly mucilaginous	Cream, red	Summer	4'–6'	A	F	Watch for spines. Adds more color than flavor.
Oregano <i>Origanum</i>		Pungent, spicy	White, lavender	Summer	24"	P	S	Herb. Flowers are milder than leaves.
Pansy <i>Viola x wittrockiana</i>		Slightly sweet, green, or grassy flavor. Petals have a mild flavor. Whole flower has a wintergreen flavor.	Wide range	Fall winter spring	6"–12"	A	F/P	Eat entire flower. Good for candying and cake decorating, or eating whole on crackers with cream cheese.






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Common and Botanical Names	Image	Flavor	Color	Bloom Season	Height	Form	Sun	Comments
Passion flower <i>Passiflora</i>		Vegetal	Purple	Spring, summer	25'	V/P	S/P	Showy flowers are best used as a garnish. Use leaves for tea. Hardy vine that freezes back in winter.
Pea, Garden <i>Pisum sativum</i>		Raw pea	White, pale pink	Spring	Varies	A	F	Add flowers and young shoots to salad. While the white flowers of edible peas are edible, the colorful flowers of, ornamental Sweet Peas, <i>Lathyrus odoratus</i> , are poisonous.
Pineapple sage <i>Salvia elegans</i>		Sweet, fruity; has a hint of mint and spice	Red	Summer	48"	P	P	Do not eat <i>Salvia cocinea</i> . Crush leaf: if it smells like pineapple, it is safe to eat; if it smells like sage or grass, do not eat.
Pineapple guava <i>Acca sellowiana</i>		Marshmallow	Pink	Spring	6'–10'	S	F/P	Pair with berries. Eat like candy, on salads, and with fruit. Good cupcake topper. Evergreen; attracts hummingbirds and butterflies.
Plum <i>Prunus</i>		Mild nectar	Pink to white	Spring	12'–20'	T	F	Petals can be candied. Pits of mature fruit are poisonous.
Purslane <i>Portulaca grandiflora</i>		Sweet, acid like	Red, pink, orange, yellow, white	Spring, summer, fall	4"–8"	A	F	All parts edible. Use fresh in salad, cooked in stir-fry, or like spinach. Contains omega-3 fatty acids.







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Radish <i>Raphanus raphanistrum subsp. sativus</i>		Spicy	White, pink	Spring, summer, fall	6"–18"	A	F	Use in salads.
Red Bud <i>Cercis Canadensis</i>		Tart or nutty	Pink	Spring	20'–30'	T	F/P	Native. Add to pancakes or fritters. Use as garnish or in salads. Also used in pickle relish.
Red clover <i>Trifolium pratense</i>		Sweet, hay	Red	Summer	8"–20"	A	F	Raw clover flowers are not easily digestible. Do not take if pregnant or nursing.
Rose <i>Rosa</i>		Perfumed. Flavors depend on type, color, and soil conditions. Strawberry to green apple; fruit to mint to spice. The darker the flower, the more flavor.	Wide range	Spring, summer	Wide range from miniature to climbing	S	F	Remove the white, bitter base of the petal. Garnish ice creams and desserts. Freeze in ice cubes and float in punches. Use petals in syrups, jellies, butters, and spreads.
Rosemary <i>Salvia rosmarinus</i>		Herbal. Flower is milder than the leaves.	Blue, white	Varies	3'–6'	P	F/P	Herb. Use as garnish. Flowers don't last long.







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Sage <i>Salvia officinalis</i>		Herbal, musky	Purple, blue, white, pink	Spring, summer	18"–30"	P	F/P	Herb. Do not eat in large amounts. Can also use leaves.
Scarlet runner bean <i>Phaseolus coccineus</i>		Mild, crunchy	Bright orange to scarlet	Summer	8'–20'	V/A	F	Flowers only last one to two days. Use raw, boiled, steamed, or sautéed.
Society Garlic <i>Tulbaghia violacea</i>		Onion to peppery	Lavender	Spring, summer, fall	12"–24"	P	F/P	Eat raw or cooked.
Snapdragon <i>Antirrhinum majus</i>		Bitter	Wide range	Winter spring	6"–36"	A	F	Best used as a garnish rather than eaten.
Squash <i>Cucurbita pepo</i>		Mild	Yellow	Summer	4'–20'	V/A	F	Fry, bake, add to pasta, use in quesadillas, soups, etc.
Summer Savory <i>Satureja hortensis</i>		Peppery, spicy	Pink or white	Summer	12"–18"	A	F	Herb. Culinary, medicinal, aromatic, and decorative. Use to flavor soups, teas, vinegars, and butters; include in potpourris.


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Sunflower <i>Helianthus annuus</i>		Buds have an artichoke flavor; petals of open flowers have a bitter-sweet flavor	Yellow	Summer fall	34"–60"	A	F	Good cut flower. Steam buds.
Sweet woodruff <i>Galium odoratum</i>		Sweet, nutty, vanilla	White	Spring	8"	P	N	Can have a blood thinning effect if eaten in large amounts.
Thyme <i>Thymus</i>		Herbal. Flower flavor is a milder version of leaf.	White, pink, purple	Summer	4"–12"	P	F	Herb. Use as garnish. Sprinkle over soups.
Tulip <i>Tulipa</i>		Vegetable-like; lettuce, fresh pea or cucumber	Wide range	Spring	6"–36"	A	F	Cucumber-like texture. Do not eat bulbs. Some people have allergic reaction causing a rash and numbness.
Violet <i>Viola odorata</i>		Sweet, perfumed	Purple, pink, white	Spring	4"–6"	P	F/P/N	Use candied or fresh. Leaves and flowers can be used in salads. Flowers can embellish desserts and iced drinks. Leaves can be cooked like spinach.
Winter Savory <i>Satureja montana</i>		Peppery, spicy	Blue, purple	Summer	24"	P	F	Herb. Use fresh in savory dishes like chicken, fish, and pork.

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Table 1. Edible Flowers (continued)

Common and Botanical Names	Image	Flavor	Color	Bloom Season	Height	Form	Sun	Comments
Yucca <i>Yucca filamentosa</i>		Artichoke, bitter	Creamy white with a purple tinge	Summer	3'–8'	P	F	Use in salads or cook in soups or stews. Try one petal, not entire blossom, if using raw to ensure there is no reaction. Can be roasted.

Form: A= Annual; B=Biennial; P=Perennial; V=Vine; S=Shrub; T=Tree

Sun: F=Full Sun; P=Partial Sun; N=No Sun; S=Shade

Additional flowers that have been reported to be edible include: Black locust, *Robinia pseudoacacia*; Cattails, *Typha*; Clary sage, *Salvia sclarea*; Common milkweed, *Asclepias syriaca*; Fuchsia, *Fuchsia x hybrida*; Gardenia, *Gardenia jasminoides*; Garlic, *Allium sativum*; Leek, *Allium ampeloprasum*; Lemon, *Citrus x limon*; Marsh mallow, *Althaea officinalis*; Nodding onion, *Allium cernuum*; Peony, *Paeonia lactiflora*; Orange, *Citrus x aurantium*; Rose of Sharon, *Hibiscus syriacus*; Safflower, *Carthamus tinctorius*; Spiderwort, *Tradescantia virginia*; Strawberry, *Fragaria x ananassa*; Water hyacinth, *Pontederia crassipes*; Water lily, *Nymphaea odorata*.

For Further Reading

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