



Barbara with flowers and herbs grown in the garden

The best blooms for eating

Barbara Segall extols the delights and uses of edible flowers

I have been a reader of *Amateur Gardening* for many years and have written about gardens and plants at different times in its past. It is great to see it saved and re-invigorated by Kelsey Publishing and editor Kim Stoddart.

When I moved to my town garden 14 years ago I was determined that I would mainly grow plants that were ornamental as well as practical. To get their 'resident's pass' plants have to perform and provide on many levels. In two of my herb books I have designed and grown sections of a garden using mainly plants with edible flowers.

There are many flowers that do double duty, offering garden ornament as well as colour and flavour in food. Eating flowers is not a new idea - flowers have been

written about as ingredients and used in cookery for centuries. In recent years their use has seen a revival, with writers and growers including Jekka McVicar, Carolyn Dunster, Erin Bunting and Jo Facer devoting whole books to them.

Many of the flowers we grow in our gardens are just beautiful as they are and are the vibrant magnets and food sources for the vital pollinators that our fruit and veg gardens need. They may be part of a current food trend but I love using them for their looks and their flavours in salads, in baking, to flavour oils, sugar and vinegars, to decorate butter and soft cheeses and also to use in teas and steeped in alcohol to make drinks' cupboard additions.

Familiar cottage garden and herb garden flowers

These are the simplest to grow in profusion for garden and kitchen use. Fragrant and aromatic plants offer the best flavour, and many of them come from the herb garden. Herbs with aromatic leaves such as rosemary, thyme, sage and lavender are safe to eat, but can have quite strong flavours. Rosemary, thyme, mint, chive, pot marigold and nasturtium all make well-coloured and aromatic ingredients, or in the case of chive, pot marigold and nasturtium, spicy additions to salads. I use nasturtium flowers as 'wrappers' for herbed soft cheese parcels. Purple basil and salad burnet flowers are

If you plan to grow flowers for the table there is one important rule to remember. Only eat flowers that you know to be edible. Never try out plants that you don't know and never eat any flower that you cannot identify.

useful to add colour and flavour to leafy green salads.

Roses and lavender, two of the most fragrant and evocative plants in the border, are used in many ways in cooking or flavouring food. I have eaten them straight from the garden or raw in various ways, but I feel they are too strong to eat just as they are.

The best roses for edible use are the highly fragrant roses classified in some catalogues as 'old roses'. I add lavender and strongly scented rose petals to caster and cane sugar to flavour it for baking and desserts; to milk and yoghurt dishes, and if steeped in a honey, a sugar syrup, vinegar or oil, they will perfume and transform them. Chive flower heads, wild garlic buds and Chinese garlic flowers can also be used in this way.

Some flowers, although edible, are simply used decoratively as garnishes. The sky blue, starry flowers of borage are more decorative than tasty and in summer drinks their role is beauty rather than taste. I pick them and freeze them into ice cubes, then pop them into cool drinks or Pimms' mixes. They do have a peppery, cucumber taste but I use them for decoration rather than food additions.

Where and what to grow in your edible flower garden

The garden is open for your planting ideas! Edible flowers are everywhere, with herbs such as rocket, coriander, fennel and radish flowers leading the charge. Although I grow them primarily for their foliage and in the case of radish, spicy roots, the flowers add such a punch of strong flavour that it is worth allowing one or two plants to flower.

You can devote a part of the vegetable garden to edible flowers, or you can plant them in the border. I like mingling them in with other plants and foraging in the garden when I want them for the kitchen table. My garden is a typical mix of sun and shade so I try to give each plant the site it will thrive in.

Trees and shrubs including magnolia and lilac offer edible possibilities, although in the case of lilac, the flowers are more useful to flavour spirits or lemonade.

I like having a framework of permanent woody and herbaceous perennials including old roses, sage and rosemary for the annuals such as pot marigold to meander through.



Make room for herbs

Maintaining the edible flower garden

If any of the edible flowers are subject to heavy insect attack I apply organic washes (not in full sun) or pick the insects off by hand. Once the plants begin to develop flower buds, I start the harvest, picking from healthy plants and avoiding any that are heavily infested with insects. I take a few flowers at a time, picking them just as they begin to open.

It is one of the garden pleasures to pick early in the day, before the sun becomes too strong. The blooms may bruise or deteriorate quickly so I always have a bowl of water ready to refresh them and I only pick when I know I can use them.

My top 10

1. I grow nasturtiums in containers and let their stems tumble over the container sides. Nasturtiums have such a peppery taste and flowers, leaves and the immature, just formed seeds are all edible. The green seeds, if pickled in brine or vinegar, are good substitutes for capers.

2. Pot marigolds or calendula are the sunniest and brightest of edible flowers in my garden. The colour range is all shades of lemon and orange offering colour in the garden as well as on the plate. I use them in salads to add a zingy colour and also in risotto or mashed potato to offer both flavour and a strong colour.

3. I usually nip out basil flowers to keep the leaf production going. I use these snippets in salads, but if I want a particularly pungent sugar syrup or want to poach pears or apples, I let some plants go to flowers so that there is always a flower or two to harvest through the summer. They are as pungent as the foliage and if you are using a lemon-flavoured basil or the variegated garlic 'Pesto' basil you will have citrus or garlic flavours to play with. I use the deep mauve flowers of 'African Blue' basil to flavour ice cream. I also use it chopped or combined with softened butter to make a spicy topping for baked potatoes.

4. Chives grow well in clumps but I also use them to line short paths and borders. I grow three types of chive: mauve, white and cha-cha chives. The latter sport tufts of green leaves that can be used whole or broken up -

My long list

My long list includes fennel, pinks, thyme, chive, rosemary, pot marigold, nasturtium, squash, rose, sage, mint, basil, daylily (warning: they have a diuretic property), pansy, violet, primrose, mallow, elder (in fritters), hyssop and elder.



The flowers and stems of chive are edible

they are mini-chivelings so I always plant one or two clumps back in the garden to get a forest of cha-cha chive plants. I use chive flowers forked into creamy mashed potato or butternut squash. They are also delicious combined with soft cheeses.

5. Fennel always makes a statuesque show in my garden, although I do use the foliage as it emerges when it is young and particularly aromatic. At some stage it gets away and flowers with wonderful insect-attracting umbels of small yellow flowers. I pick the flowers when they are just showing a smudge of yellow and use them to flavour milk for fish dishes and snipped into salads. Fennel pollen is a sought-after cheffy ingredient, but I don't have the patience for this, so simply use the flowers for their aniseed flavour. When the flowers have gone to seed, I harvest the seed for drying to use in curries and as after-dinner palate cleansers. I then cut back the long stems and wait for another flush of foliage.



Fennel

6. Pinks or *Dianthus*, especially those that are clove-scented such as 'Mrs Sinkins', 'Dad's Favourite' or 'Inchmery', offer garden and kitchen aromatics. I use them to flavour vinegar or fresh in salads and poached with fruit. I always remove the base of the petals as this is quite bitter to the taste.



Dianthus



Pelargonium flowers

7. Scented pelargonium flowers combined with their foliage offer strong flavour to jellies and biscuits. As they are tender perennials I grow just one or two such as *Pelargonium* 'Attar of Roses' and *P.* 'Lemon Fancy' as container plants, so that I can bring them into the greenhouse over winter.

8. Elderflowers offer so much to the kitchen as well as to the garden. Although I do forage for hedgerow white-flowered elder in spring I grow the purple-foliage *Sambucus nigra* 'Black Beauty' with its umbels of small rose-pink flowers. They are delicious dipped in a tempura batter and lightly sauteed, and of course they are the basis of elderflower champagne, cordial and many other concoctions. And if you leave sufficient flowers on the plant or in the hedgerow, the berries that follow are a 'go to' as the main ingredient of a seasonal dessert sauce and also a cough syrup!

9. Hyssop flowers are usually blue/mauve, white and pink, depending on variety and like the leaves have a spicy, minty flavour. They add colour and heat to salads. I use them with the leaves to make a soothing tea, and as an alternative to lavender for scones and biscuits.

Preparing the flowers

Pick early in the day, handle the flowers gently and check them for insect lodgers. Delicate flowers, such as nasturtium, bruise easily, so take care when you rinse them. Always rinse the flowers in cool water to remove any hidden insects. I always leave them to drain for a short while in a colander or between sheets of absorbent paper. Until I am ready to use them I keep them in containers, lined with absorbent paper in the refrigerator. Any flowers that have long stems I put in water in tall glasses out of direct sunlight.



Calendula, fennel, nasturtium in the colander



Hyssop flowers

10. Summer and winter savory produce small white flowers that are particularly strongly flavoured. I use the annual summer savory when I cook broad and runner beans. The woody, shrubby perennial winter savory is peppery, so I used it sparingly in salads and more generously in cooked dishes.



Primrose flowers are also edible

Using the flowers

I use individual petals of roses, pinks and marigolds, snipping them gently away from the main flower head. And in the case of roses and calendulas I remove the white portion of the petal, which is always bitter to the taste. Use the flowers sparingly so as not to overwhelm other flavours, as they will be strongly flavoured.

The most obvious and simplest use is as an edible decoration or garnish. Adding flowers to salads is one of my favourite ways to use them. I also enjoy floating flowers in wine cups or as garnishes for sweet dishes.

You can also preserve flowers by crystallising them in egg white and dipping them in sugar. When they are

prepared they are useful as decorations for cakes and sweets. Rose petals, primroses, pansies, violets and scented pelargonium are my choices.

Flowers, or their flavours, are preserved in oil, vinegar, butter, or by crystallising, but mostly they are best used fresh. Some can be frozen into ice cubes for decorative uses, but others, such as marigolds, can be frozen for later use.

Edible flowers can also be used to flavour sugars, butters and vinegars, that will in turn flavour cakes, bread and salads and they look just gorgeous. Whole flowerheads of lavender and rosemary can be left for a few weeks in sugar to flavour it.



Many herbs and flowers like winter savory can be grown in pots

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