

# Minnesota Commercial Flower Growers Association Bulletin

Serving the Floriculture Industry in the Upper Midwest

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## EDIBLE FLOWERS

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The use of edible flowers in cooking and as garnishes has regained popularity over the past decade. Edible flowers have moved from the oddity used by herbalists and gourmet cooks to a common ingredient in salads, sauces and desserts. The use of flowers in cooking has come to distinguish many cooks and restaurants as something special.

The use of flowers in cooking brings an interesting link to the past. Nicander, a poet and doctor, mentions the use of rose water as early as 140 B.C. Classic recipes of Rome called for roses, mallow flowers, flower bulbs and violet and rose wine.

A wide variety of flowers have been used throughout the century in numerous ways. They flavored sugar, sweet sauces, liqueurs and potions; were baked into custards and tarts; pulped into pottages with almonds, sugar and spices; candied, pickled, frittered; made into jams and conserves and were eaten raw in salads. Flowers are still used widely today in oriental cooking. Jasmine, roses, lotus, marigolds, narcissus and peonies are used in a variety of teas in China and Japan. Chrysanthemums are battered and fried as fritters. Lily buds and jasmine flowers, as well as chrysanthemums, are used in soups. In the Middle East, roses and orange flowers are used in all types of cooking, flavoring pastry ice cream, meat dishes and teas.

For many years the use of flowers in cooking and teas was associated with magic, herbal medicine and alchemy. Floral potions were used to cure sick children, or to enable one "to see the fairies". Today camomile or lime flower tea is used as a sleep aid, carnation soup is used to help cure depression and elder flower champagne is considered the essence of summer. A sip of hawthorn cordial on a dark winter evening is thought to bring back the hot, sunny scent of a summer day.



## 20 Culinary Standouts

|                                   |  |  |
|-----------------------------------|--|--|
| <b>Anise Hyssop</b>               | <i>Aqastache foeniculum</i>  | Strong anise to root-beer taste; use sparingly .   |
| <b>Apple Blossom</b>              | <i>Malus</i> spp.  | Delicate floral taste.   |
| <b>Borage</b>                     | <i>Borago officinalis</i>  | Cucumber taste; remove hairy sepals.   |
| <b>Calendula</b>                  | <i>Calendula officinalis</i>   | Slight floral taste; all varieties seem to have similar taste.   |
| <b>Chives</b>                     | <i>Allium schoenoprasum</i><br><i>Allium tuberosum</i>                       | Onion flavor, use when buds first open or they will be papery and tough; the flowers of the Oriental types have a more floral quality.         |
| <b>Chrysanthemum</b>              | <i>Chrysanthemum morifolium</i>  | Chrysanthemum petals range from slightly to very bitter; taste test.   |
| <b>Daylily</b>                    | <i>Heemerocallis</i> spp.  | Some varieties floral and pleasant, others taste metallic; taste test.   |
| <b>Elderberry</b>                 | <i>Sambucus caerulea</i>   | Blossoms traditionally prepared as fritters; definitively identify species as some elderberries are poisonous.                                 |
| <b>Fennel</b>                     |  | All culinary herb flowers are edible. This is one of six with the most interesting taste. Others are thyme, basil, rosemary, sage and arugula. |
| <b>Geranium</b>                   | <i>Pelargonium</i> spp.  | Scented geraniums much superior to common geraniums in flavor; particularly choice are the rose and peppermint varieties.                      |
| <b>Lavender</b>                   | <i>Lavandula angustifolia</i>  | English lavender has sweet lemon-floral taste superior for cooking; other species taste medicinal.   |
| <b>Lilac</b>                      | <i>Syringa vulgaris</i>  | Lilac clusters, floral taste.  |
| <b>Nasturtium</b>                 | <i>Tropaeolum majus</i>  | Watercress-type flavor, one of the most versatile and widely accepted. Whirlybird types have a spur and are easier to clean.                   |
| <b>Pink</b>                       | <i>Dianthus</i> spp.   | Delicate clove taste. The classic cottage pinks have a particularly delicate taste.  |
| <b>Rose</b>                       | <i>Rosa</i> spp.   | Diverse flavors from floral and lush to metallic; taste test. <i>Rosa rugosa</i> 'Alba', 'Eglantine' and damask types are choice.              |
| <b>Sage</b>                       |  | One of the six culinary herbs with the most interesting taste.   |
| <b>Scarlet Runner Bean</b>        | <i>Phaseolus coccineus</i>   | Nectar and bean flavored; most varieties have a similar taste.   |
| <b>Squash Blossom</b>             | <i>Cucurbita</i> spp.  | Slight squash taste, little difference between varieties. Pumpkin and some zucchini blossoms are large and easier to stuff.                    |
| <b>Viola Pansy Johnny-jump-up</b> | <i>Viola cornuta</i><br><i>Viola x Wittrockiana</i><br><i>Viola tricolor</i> | Light floral flavor; little difference in taste among varieties.   |
| <b>Violet</b>                     | <i>Viola odorata</i>   | Strong floral taste.   |

### Warning

The flowers on this partial listing of common poisonous plants should be considered toxic and not included in any culinary presentation, whether it be in the food itself or as a garnish on the plate. All parts of the plants are toxic except where noted.

|                           |   |  |
|---------------------------|---|--|
| <b>Amaryllis</b>          | <i>Hippeastrum puniceum</i>                             | bulb   |
| <b>Anemone</b>            | <i>Anemone tuberosa</i>                                 | other species also toxic                               |
| <b>Autumn crocus</b>      | <i>Colchicum autumnale</i>                              |  |
| <b>Azalea</b>             | <i>Rhododendron</i> sp.                                 |  |
| <b>Belladonna Lily</b>    | <i>Amaryllis belladonna</i>                             | bulb; also known as <b>Naked Lady</b>                  |
| <b>Bird-of-Paradise</b>   | <i>Strelitzia reginae</i>                               | seeds and pods   |
| <b>Buckeye</b>            | <i>Aesculus arguta</i><br><i>Aesculus hippocastanum</i> | seeds, flowers and leaves;<br>other species also toxic |
| <b>Buttercup</b>          | <i>Ranunculus</i> spp.                                  |  |
| <b>Caladium</b>           | <i>Caladium bicolor</i>                                 | other species also toxic                               |
| <b>Cardinal Flower</b>    | <i>Lobelia cardinalis</i>                               |  |
| <b>Clematis</b>           | <i>Clematis</i> spp.                                    |  |
| <b>Daffodil</b>           | <i>Narcissus pseudonarcissus</i>                        | bulb   |
| <b>Datura</b>             | <i>Datura meteloides</i>                                |  |
| <b>Gloriosa Lily</b>      | <i>Gloriosa</i> spp.                                    |  |
| <b>Hydrangea</b>          | <i>Hydrangea</i> spp.                                   |  |
| <b>Iris</b>               | <i>Iris</i> spp.  | leaves and rootstock                                   |
| <b>Jessamine</b>          | <i>Gelsemium sempervirens</i>                           |  |
| <b>Lantana</b>            | <i>Lantana</i> spp.                                     |  |
| <b>Larkspur</b>           | <i>Delphinium</i> spp.                                  |  |
| <b>Lily-of-the-Valley</b> | <i>Convallaria majalis</i>                              |  |
| <b>Lupine</b>             | <i>Lupinus</i> spp.                                     |  |
| <b>Monkshood</b>          | <i>Aconitum</i> spp.                                    |  |
| <b>Narcissus</b>          | <i>Narcissus</i> spp.                                   |  |
| <b>Oleander</b>           | <i>Nerium oleander</i>                                  |  |
| <b>Poinsettia</b>         | <i>Euphorbia pulcherrima</i>                            |  |
| <b>Sweet Peas</b>         | <i>Lathyrus</i> spp.                                    |  |
| <b>Rhododendron</b>       | <i>Rhododendron</i> spp.                                |  |
| <b>Star-of-Bethlehem</b>  | <i>Ornithogalum</i> spp.                                |  |
| <b>Tansy</b>              | <i>Tanacetum vulgare</i>                                |  |
| <b>Wisteria</b>           | <i>Wisteria floribunda</i><br><i>Wisteria sinensis</i>  | pods and seeds   |



The following common flowers should be avoided, as no reliable documentation of their safety has been found:

|                           |                         |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| <b>Bachelor's-buttons</b> | <i>Centaurea cyanus</i> |
| <b>Impatiens</b>          | <i>Impatiens</i> spp.   |
| <b>Mullein</b>            | <i>Verbascum</i> spp.   |
| <b>Petunias</b>           | <i>Petunia</i> spp.     |
| <b>Primrose</b>           | <i>Primula</i> spp.     |
| <b>Snapdragon</b>         | <i>Antirrhinum</i> spp. |

**Care must be taken when using flowers, or any unusual plant in cooking.**

While the use of flowers in cooking was once considered quite common, it is never considered ordinary. Flowers add a certain elegance to any meal or beverage in which they are used.

Care must be taken when using flowers, or any unusual plant in cooking. While we are all familiar with the phrase "many parts are edible", we need to remember that many parts, and many plants, are poisonous. Check a reliable reference to find out the usefulness of any plant, and check it not only by common name, but also by scientific name.

With some of the chefs that use flowers regularly on their menus, it is often not enough to have the right plant, you must have the right cultivar of that plant. The chefs at one restaurant agree that rugosa roses are good for many dishes, but that the best tasting rugosa rose varieties are 'Belinda', 'Belle of Portugal' and 'Cecile Bruner'. These particular flowers are used to flavor honey, for candying and in sorbets.

When raising flowers for eating purposes, be sure to avoid the use of pesticides. Many of the chemicals that are labeled for use on ornamentals are not designed to breakdown for use of the flowers for eating. To be safe, if an insect problem appears, consider using a mild soap spray to control the problem. Flowers that you may purchase for culinary purposes, and labeled as such, should not present any problems.

When harvesting flowers for cooking, select flowers just after they have opened. Pick the flowers in the morning hours, just after the dew has lifted. If the flowers are dusty, carefully rinse them with a small amount of water. Flowers can be used if they

are damp, but not if they are soggy. Carefully shake the flowers to eliminate any hiding insects.

If you are planning to dry flowers for use in the "off-season" again pick them just after the dew has dried off of them. Carefully place the flowers in a single layer on a screen, spread out as much as possible. The flowers need to have good air circulation all around them for proper drying. Place them in the shade, away from heavy breezes, or even better in a drying cupboard. Be sure to check the flowers several times a day, and shake or stir them as needed to ensure even drying. When the flowers are completely desiccated and brittle to the touch, store them in cardboard boxes or air tight containers. Be sure the flowers are completely dry before putting them in storage or they will spoil.

Remove stems, leaves and any green portion of the flower. The white heels at the base of rose, pinks and marigolds should also be removed. Often times flowers are separated into petals for use. Small flowers or buds may be left in tact.

Remember that the use of flowers in cooking can be very enjoyable and the flowers can really add a new dimension to your meals. Also remember to be careful and know what plant you are using before you eat it.

Information and recipes for this article were found in the following:

Clifton, C. 1983. Edible Flowers. McGraw-Hill, New York, N. Y.

Creasy, R. 1990. Edible Flowers. Organic Gardening 37(2): 47-49.

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## RECIPES

### White Chocolate and Violet Mousse

White chocolate is wickedly rich. Dark chocolate mousse is splendid, especially when made with extra bitter chocolate and orange flower water, but this one is deliciously unctuous and dense. It does need alcohol to cut the sweetness a little. Try making it with home-made violet liqueur or vanilla brandy. If you want a stronger scent of violets add a teaspoonful of violet flavoring with brandy, rum or any liqueur.

5 oz. white chocolate  
2 eggs  
1-2 Tbsp. spirit  
10 oz. double cream  
candied violets

Break the chocolate into small pieces. Put them into a blender with the eggs, spirit and flavoring. Blend until smooth. Add the cream and blend for a minute or two more. Pour into small glasses or demi-tasses (these quantities will fill 6) to chill. Decorate with candied violets just before serving.

**Variation:** Use single cream and freeze in a metal bowl. Whip into a froth (in a food processor if you have one) before serving. The violets look very pretty in their mounds of 'snow'.

### Corn and Marigold Pudding

Marigolds give this savory dish a nice color, texture and a hint of nuttiness. It can be made more substantial for a light luncheon or as an addition to a vegetarian supper by adding 2 ounces of grated cheese, parmesan or cheddar.

1 lb. frozen corn kernel  
2 oz. butter  
1/2 pint milk  
2 eggs, separated, the whites stiffly beaten  
salt and pepper  
good handful dried or fresh marigold petals

Process or mince the corn (or mix it in a blender with the milk). Add the butter, milk, beaten egg yolks, salt, pepper, marigolds and cheese if you are using it. Fold in the stiffly beaten egg whites and bake in a baking or souffle dish for 30-35 minutes in a moderate oven (400°F). It should be lightly browned on the top and puffed up like a souffle or quiche.

### Candied Flowers

Delicate crystallized flowers are beautiful decorations for pudding, ice cream, cakes, fruit salads or just to crunch on their own while sipping a comforting tisane or a flower ratafia while reading a romantic novel or love letter. Use tiny rose buds, pinks, rose petals, violets, mimosa, lilacs cowslips, fruit or herb flowers and mint leaves. It must be done on a very dry day. Pick the flowers, remove all stems and green, trim the white heels from rose petals and pinks. Wash and dry them thoroughly. There are several methods:

- 1) Beat 2 or more egg whites until frothy. Paint each flower, leaf or petal with the egg white with a clean, soft paint brush, then hold with tweezers and dip each one into sugar and make sure that they are completely coated. Place on a baking sheet or tray and dry them in an airing cupboard or warm oven with the door ajar.
- 2) Beat egg white until frothy and then add enough icing sugar to make a soft coating paste. Apply with a brush, then place each flower on a tray or baking sheet and sprinkle with sugar. Dry as above.
- 3) Dissolve 2 ounces of gum arabic (sold in Oriental stores as Goonder or Edible Gum) in 10 ounces of rose water. You may need to heat it gently. Allow to cool, then dip each flower into the mixture and then into sugar. Dry as above.
- 4) Place 1 cup of sugar and 1/2 cup of water and a pinch of cream of tartar in a saucepan. Cook over a fairly high heat, stirring with a wooden spoon until it forms a syrup and spins a thread off the spoon. Dip each flower into the syrup and then dip or sprinkle with sugar. Dry as above.

When all your flowers are dry, place them between sheets of waxed or greaseproof paper in boxes or tins.



**Elder Flower 'Champagne'**

The flowers should be picked at the end of a dry summer day when the flavor will be more fully developed. It will be slightly fizzy and ready to drink in 2 months.

1 gallon water  
 1 1/2 lbs. sugar  
 7 large heads of elder flower  
 1 lemon and 1 orange, sliced  
 2 Tbsp. white wine vinegar

Boil the water and pour it over the sugar. When it is cold, add the elder flowers, lemon, orange and vinegar. Cover with a thick cloth and leave for 24 hours. Squeeze the flowers and strain the liquid through a fine sieve or muslin. Store in glass containers - bottles with snap-on tops or glass jars with a hinged lid and rubber seal. Serve iced.

**Tea for the Blues**

For those tenebrous days when you're singing the 'I've Got the You Don't Know the Half of It Dearie Blues'. The slightly peppery sharpness of the lavender will help a headache and the warm honey of the orange flower and soothing lemon verbena will calm jangled nerves.

1 measure lemon verbena  
 1 measure orange blossoms  
 1/2 measure lavender

Mix together in a bowl with your hands. Store in air-tight tins. Use 1 to 2 heaped tablespoons per pot and drink without milk.

