

Edible Flowers

AND OTHER MUNCHABLE BEAUTIES

PHOTOS AND STORY BY MELANIE REKOLA

From sautéed daylily buds in butter to candied rose petals to decorate your desserts, there may be hidden gourmet treats just waiting to be plucked from your own backyard paradise. Whether in the garden or on the table, these culinary delights perform double duty by not only pleasing the palate, but pleasing to the eye as well.

Thought of as trendy in recent years, edible flowers are not a new fashion. The use of daylily buds came from Asia and the Romans cooked with mallow, rose and violets. Italian and Hispanic cultures gave us stuffed squash blossoms and many other cultures have incorporated flowers into their traditional foods. Their culinary use dates back thousands of years with first mention in 140 B.C.

MELANIE'S PLANT PICKS

To make my short and critical list, these plants have to be not only tasty, but look first rate in your landscape and be low-care as well. Here are my favourites.



NASTURTIUM – FLOWERS AND LEAVES:

Nasturtium is probably the most well known edible annual. It is extremely easy to grow by sowing seeds directly into your garden in May, even in lean soil. They hate transplanting so don't bother trying to get a head start by sprouting indoors. Available in a range of red, orange and gold,

this pretty sprawling plant has beautiful roundish leaves that are sometimes variegated. The "Alaskan Mix" is my personal favourite. Its flavour is mildly pungent and peppery, with the leaves having a stronger taste than the flowers. The flowers can be stuffed with cream cheese and chives, the leaves stuffed with salmon cream cheese and cucumber. Both can be made into vinegar or added to salads, depending on the dressing. Why not make delectable nasturtium-lemon butter to add flavour to a sautéed dish of choice?

GLADIOLUS – BLOSSOMS: This easy-care, tender bulb needs fertile soil and is also planted in May. Tall varieties may need to be staked and are best placed towards the back of a typical garden bed. This showy plant comes in a wide colour range from bright, saturated colours to pure white and even green. The beautiful, large blossoms of the old-fashioned gladiolus have a lettuce-like flavour great for salads or even as a one-of-a-kind presentation with a few placed in a glass bowl and filled with your favourite dip.



DAYLILY – BUDS: I can't say enough about this great perennial. Daylilies are drought-tolerant and low care, come in a wide variety of colours and sizes and their strappy foliage offers a textural interest that is pleasing in most landscapes. Each blossom lasts for one day, but it makes up for it with an abundance of blossoms that can last a month and sometimes even re-blooms. The buds are best eaten the day before they are

about to open and I find the scented varieties taste sweeter. I like them raw; on their own or in salads, but they are also tasty in your favourite stir fry, just don't overcook. Their flavour is sweet and crunchy, much like cucumber.

SQUASH VINE – BLOSSOMS AND FRUIT:

Although not commonly used in the residential landscape, annual squash vine looks beautiful trained up arbours, trellises or even fencing. Why not maximize the often forgotten vertical element of





CANDIED FLOWERS

Time: about 1 hour

Rinsed and dried edible flower blossoms, separated from the stem

1 extra-large egg white, at room temperature

Few drops of water

About 1 cup superfine sugar

A small paint brush

Waxed Paper

- Combine the egg white with the water and beat lightly until the white just shows a few bubbles. Place the sugar in a shallow dish.
- Holding a flower or petal in one hand, dip paint brush into the egg white with the other and gently paint the flower. Cover the flower or petal entirely but not excessively, then hold over the sugar dish and gently sprinkle sugar evenly all over on both sides. Place the flower or petal on the waxed paper to dry.
- Let the flowers dry completely. This could take 12 to 36 hours, depending on the humidity in your home. To hasten drying, you may place the candied flowers in an oven with a pilot light overnight.
- Store the dried, candied flowers in airtight containers until ready to use. They will keep for as long as a year.

the landscape? Squash vine has lush leaves and huge yellow flowers that look great in any landscape. You can eat some of the gorgeous flowers and leave some to mature into squash. The textured blooms taste sweet and can be made into soup, stuffed, battered and sautéed or even made into quesadillas.

SERVICEBERRY – BERRIES: The native serviceberry is a wonderful small tree usable in almost every landscape. It has plenty of white blooms in spring, berries in later summer that are usually blue, and the foliage turns a lovely scarlet in fall. When properly pruned it even looks great in winter. The pretty berries can be eaten raw, made into jam, jelly or pie; provided you get to them before the birds do. They are sweet/tart in flavour and a bit seedy, but worth it for their distinctive taste.



SCARLET RUNNER BEAN – FLOWERS AND BEANS: This is another low care and attractive fast climbing vine. Like nasturtium, just sow seeds in fertile soil in May. They dislike transplant as well. They have lush foliage, unique red flowers that hummingbirds can't resist and a profusion of beans. The flowers have a pea-like flavour, good for

salads. The beans can be steamed or eaten raw when young, or if left to maturity, just shell and use in any recipe calling for lima beans. Don't forget to save a few pods for seed planting next year!

CHIVE – FLORETS AND LEAVES: Chives are a commonly grown perennial herb, but most people do not think to incorporate them into their ornamental gardens. This small plant looks excellent planted in

large groups with their distinctive spiky texture. Their lavender or white rounded blooms are made up of numerous tiny florets that bees adore. These florets can be separated and added to salads where an onion flavour is required or sauté them with fresh-from-the-garden asparagus and a little soy sauce.



LILAC, APPLE AND PLUM – BLOSSOMS: Who doesn't love the abundant and fragrant blooms of these familiar woody plants. There is always room in even the smallest property for the shrub-like Dwarf Korean Lilac and apple and plum are smallish trees that provide fruit as well. I grouped this vegetation together as their flowers are so pretty. I only want to candy them and decorate a cake!

Other blooms that can be used for this are pansies, roses and scented geraniums. Though "candying" flowers is a bit time consuming, they are really tasty and make a striking presentation.

If the thought of actually cooking and eating flowers is just too scary, most edible flowers make a fabulous garnish. It's still important to match the flavours to your dish. A great resource is homecooking.about.com/library/weekly/blflowers.htm for a great online list of flowers fit for consumption with a complete list of pertinent warnings and flavour comparisons.

It is imperative for safety's sake to only use flowers that are truly safe for human consumption in your food presentation. People generally assume all is edible if on their plate. Organic is always best and be sure to remove pistils and stamens from flowers before eating. Eat only the petals. As well, those prone to environmental allergies should use caution when trying for the first time. Be creative and bon appétit! **OH**