

Have you ever looked out over a colorful bed of gorgeous flowers and thought to yourself “Oh, they just look good enough to eat!”? Well, go get some edible flower seeds and start growing some for the table. They will look good in the garden, on the table and on your plate. The unexpected color, flavor, and fragrance will add an extra dimension to your cuisine, just like fancy restaurant fare.

Flowers have been a part of creative cooking for centuries, so there are many resources available on the delicate flavorings of edible flowers. Just a few include the sweet flavor of honeysuckle and daylily blooms, the slightly bitter taste of snapdragons and marigolds, the wintergreen flavor of violas, and the spicy pepper taste of nasturtiums. If you leave the broccoli in the garden too long and the blossoms open, use the flowers for a spicy flavor. Lavender and rose petals are often used to add fragrance to food. And there is a phenomenal market now in upscale restaurants for squash blossoms. The blossoms are popular as garnishes, stuffed with cheese or seafood, or fried in a cornmeal batter.

Before you run outside to graze in the flower garden with the butterflies and caterpillars, think about how you have been taking care of your plants. Have you been spraying for insects? Never eat flowers that may have been treated with pesticides. Commercially grown flowers from florists or plants right from the garden center may have pesticide residues. Flowers from farmers markets and roadside stands may also have had pesticide applications. It is much safer to grow your own chemical-free flowers for use in the kitchen.

Check reliable sources such as UF/IFAS <http://solutionsforyourlife.com> to make sure the flower that looks yummy is actually edible. Even though a flower is identified as edible, it may cause allergic reactions in some people. So try just a few blossoms at a time if you are normally sensitive to pollen and remove the pollen-bearing parts from the center.

The best time to harvest flowers is in the morning after the dew has evaporated. Flowers at their peak will have the best flavor. You can keep long stemmed flowers in a vase for a day before using, but short stemmed blossoms should be used within a few hours after picking. Put them in a zipper bag and keep them in the refrigerator until just before you use them. Then wash them off gently and check for insects or soil.

Enjoy edible flowers as garnishes or as ingredients in prepared dishes. They can be frozen in ice cubes and added to a summery beverage. Flowers can be added to cheese spreads, herbal butters, vinegars and salad dressings. But don't forget to put some in the vase, too. Then enjoy the compliments to the chef.

Plan on attending our Butterfly Gardening Class and the ‘Make and Take’ Rain Barrel class offered at the extension office this month. Call the office at 752-5384 for details. The UF Columbia County Master Gardeners are at the Extension Office on Tuesday, Thursday and Friday mornings to answer gardening questions. If you are interested in growing flowers as a business, check out <http://smallfarms.ifas.ufl.edu>  
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