



*Bright colors, subtle flavors. Edible flowers come in a broad range of sizes and shapes. They include day lilies, snapdragons, Johnny-jump-ups, pansies, roses, and lavender flowers.*

# Cooking with Flowers

Edible flowers add one-of-a-kind flavor, color, and texture

BY ELENA MARCHESO MORENO

People who love to cook and create in their kitchens often have equal passion for their gardens. Yet few who pluck flowers for the dining table think of serving flowers on dinner plates. These folks miss out on a lot of sensory impact. A simple dish becomes still-life material with the addition of a few edible flowers. Flower flavors range from spicy to, well, flowery, and even their scents can contribute to a dish. The shapes and textures of edible flowers are a virtue unto themselves; they can be smooth or rough, flat or curved, ruffled or spiked.

## THE FLORAL HARVEST

From early spring to late summer, if you have a bit of soil to till or even a window box, you can grow edible

flowers. All it takes is a little planning. Seeds for edible flowers are available at many garden shops (see sources on p. 67). Some of the easiest types to find are highly scented varieties of common garden flowers, such as roses, lilacs, and violets. Treat the flowers you grow with the same respect you would any food-bearing plant: don't use chemicals.

**Even without a garden, it's easy to plan a meal around colorful blossoms.** Most fine food stores have access to fresh flowers. If the flowers you want are not in stock, merchants can sometimes special-order them within a few days; however, not all flowers are available year-round, except perhaps in California.

Ironically, the flower shop is one of the worst sources for edible flowers. Edible flowers must be

grown without pesticides and specifically for consumption; florists' products aren't organically grown, and many are sprayed with preservatives.

**When choosing edible flowers, fragrance means flavor.** Pick flowers that have almost reached their peak, when their colors are bright and their petals firm. To prevent wilting, gather them in the cool morning. Only flowers to be dried for teas or seasonings, such as calendula or lavender, should be picked in the heat of the day, when they are free of dew. Wash the blossoms thoroughly, but gently, under a slow stream of cool water. Drain and store them between layers of paper towels in the refrigerator until you're ready to use them. Flowers are best eaten the day you pick them.

### NOT ALL FLOWERS ARE EDIBLE

Edible flowers are a joy, but free-range grazing from your garden, even if it's organic, is not a good idea. Some flowers are poisonous, and some cause allergic reactions, so when in doubt, *do not* eat them unless you have first checked with your local agricultural extension service. With that in mind, here's a list of flowers that can be enjoyed by both the eye and the palate, categorized by whether they are most appropriate with sweet or savory dishes, or both.

**Sweet**—anise hyssop, elderberry, honeysuckle, lavender, lemon balm, rose, scented geranium, violet.

**Savory**—borage, calendula, chive, chervil, chrysanthemum, coriander, dandelion, day lily, dill, fennel, lovage, nasturtium, rosemary, sage, squash, thyme.

**Sweet/savory**—daisy, dianthus, lilac, mint, pansy.

### FLOWER FEASTING GUIDELINES

If you grow edible flowers, your garden can dictate the menu. You can combine types of flowers, but don't go overboard—with their complex, sometimes contrary flavors, too many flowers can spoil the broth even faster than too many cooks. Flowers shouldn't dominate dishes; they should provide subtle flavors.

A mesclun salad is an ideal setting for edible flowers. To create a balance between flowers and greens, use about four parts greens to one part flowers. Great salad flowers include crisp and spicy nasturtium, chive, and borage. To match the flowers' delicate textures, it's best to use tender greens such as Bibb, endive, red oak leaf, arugula, and mâche. Toss the greens with a light vinaigrette and then gently mix in the flowers.

Spicy flowers also are excellent for infusing oils. For a pint of oil, you'll need about 1½ cups of flower petals. Mild-flavored oils like canola work well, but even more assertive extra-virgin olive oil works with the right choice of flower—lavender, thyme, or fennel, for example. Fill a bottle with oil



*To make plain custard water-color pretty, add Johnny-jump-ups. This effect is created by pouring in the custard after you put the flowers in the ramekin. The flowers will rise to the top.*



*Edible flowers flavor a savory appetizer. Here, the author adds lavender and chive blossoms to a hinge-top jar containing goat cheese and extra-virgin olive oil. After a few days, the flowers flavor the oil, which in turn permeates the cheese.*

and flowers, and heat gently in a pan of water for about thirty minutes. Store tightly covered for at least ten days. To keep infused oils fresh, store them in the refrigerator.

Infused oils also can create a beautiful and easy hors d'oeuvre. Place a round of goat cheese in a jar that has a tight seal. Pour in olive oil to cover, add strongly flavored flowers like lavender and chive, and refrigerate for a few days. The blossoms' flavors will permeate both the oil and the cheese.

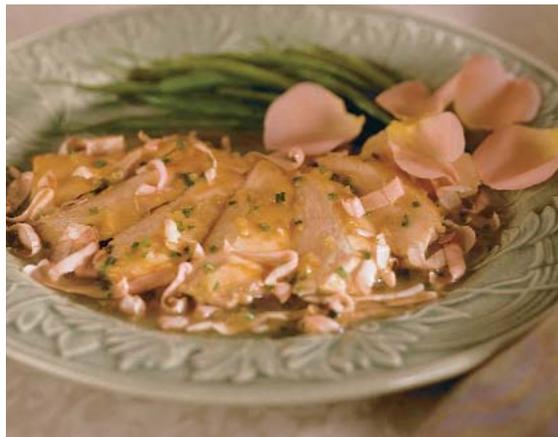
Flower butters look truly exotic, but they're easy to make. Soften a half pound of butter to room temperature. Mix in three tablespoons of finely slivered petals and a few drops of lemon juice, and then pack the butter into crocks or ramekins.

To make flower-flavored sugars, add two parts flowers to one part sugar in alternate layers. Cover with a tight-fitting lid and store for at least two weeks. Roses, scented geraniums, and honeysuckle are good choices for floral sugars, which can be used for sweetening cookies or delicate cakes.



**Sugar and egg whites** crystallize violets. The petals are brushed with an egg-white wash, dipped in superfine sugar, and allowed to dry. This method also can be used to crystallize other small flowers.

**No ordinary seasoning.** Slivered rose petals make a delicate but fragrant sauce for chicken breasts; a splash of rose water echoes the flavor. The same flower that flavors the dish decorates the plate.



### ROSE-PETAL CHICKEN BREASTS

This delicate chicken dish has a slightly exotic flavor. Serve with plain steamed vegetables. *Serves four.*

**2 whole boneless, skinless chicken breasts**  
**Salt and freshly ground black pepper**  
**2 Tbs. butter**  
**2 Tbs. peeled and minced fresh ginger (about a 2-in. piece)**  
**Small clove garlic, minced (optional)**  
**¼ cup dry sherry**  
**2 Tbs. rose water (available at Middle Eastern stores, specialty markets, or boutiques like Crabtree & Evelyn)**  
**1 tsp. honey**  
**2 Tbs. finely chopped chives**  
**1 cup petals from a strongly scented rose, slivered**

Halve each chicken breast. Put each half breast between two sheets of waxed paper and lightly pound to a uniform thickness. Season with salt and pepper.

Melt the butter in a large saucepan over medium heat. When it begins to bubble, add the ginger and garlic and sauté for 2 min. Raise the heat to medium high, add the breasts, and sauté until lightly golden, about 3 min. on each side. Transfer the chicken to a plate and keep warm.

Turn the heat to high and add the sherry, rose water, and honey to the pan. As the sauce bubbles, stir up the browned bits that remain in the pan. Simmer for 1 min. and then stir in the chives and rose petals. To serve, cut the breasts into slices, arrange on warm plates, and spoon some sauce on top.

### CRYSTALLIZED VIOLETS

When the first violets unfurl their blossoms in April, I rush to pick the most beautiful for candied violets. Rose petals and lilac florets also take well to candying.

**Egg whites**  
**Water**  
**Violets**  
**Superfine sugar**

Beat egg whites with a few drops of water. Hold a violet by the stem. With a small, clean paintbrush, coat the violet petals (both sides) with the egg whites. Dip the flowers in superfine sugar and shake off the excess. Dry them on waxed paper; larger flowers may have to be turned with tweezers to allow them to dry completely. When the flowers have dried, snip off the stems. Store them in an airtight container; the violets will keep indefinitely.

### BAKED CUSTARD WITH VIOLETS

Easy to prepare and not too fancy, this custard is a comforting yet pretty dessert. *Serves eight.*

**¾ cup violet or Johnny-jump-up blossoms**  
**3 extra-large eggs**  
**2 extra-large egg yolks**  
**½ cup sugar**  
**3 cups whole milk**  
**¾ tsp. flower water or vanilla extract**

Heat the oven to 350°F.

Divide the violets among eight 6-oz. ramekins.

Whisk together the eggs, yolks, and sugar. Add the milk and flower water, and stir until the sugar dissolves. Divide the custard among the ramekins; the violets will float to the top. Set the dishes into a larger baking dish. Pour very hot water into the outer dish until it reaches halfway up the ramekins. Carefully put the baking dish, with the ramekins, in the oven. Lower the temperature to 325° and bake 45 to 50 min., until a knife inserted into the center of the custard comes out nearly clean. Serve warm or chilled.

### SOURCES FOR FLOWERS AND SEEDS

*Edible flowers are delicate, so it's best to grow your own or buy them locally. If that's not possible, some companies will ship.*

#### Flowers only

**Melissa's By Mail,**  
 PO Box 21127, Los Angeles,  
 CA 90021; 800/588-0151.

**Quail Mountain Herbs,**  
 PO Box 1049, Watsonville,  
 CA 95077; 408/722-8456.

Contact this distributor for the retailer closest to you.

**Wild Oats Community Markets** has stores in California, Colorado, Kansas, Missouri, and New Mexico. Call 303/938-1132 for the one nearest you.

#### Seeds only

**The Cook's Garden, PO**  
 Box 535, Londonderry, VT  
 05148-0535; 802/824-3400.

**The Gourmet Gardener,**  
 8650 College Blvd.,  
 Suite 205, Overland Park,  
 KS 66210; 913/345-0490.

**Shepherd's Garden Seeds,**  
 30 Irene St., Torrington, CT  
 06790; 203/482-3638.

*Elena Marcheso Moreno grew up cooking in her family's restaurants. Now she writes and cooks in McLean, Virginia, and is currently writing a cookbook. She grows up to a dozen types of edible flowers every summer. ♦*