

Growing Guide: Edible Flowers

FUN FACTS

- Nasturtiums are originally from Peru, where the leaves as well as the flowers were eaten by the Incas.
- People have been cooking with flowers for centuries, but the concept became especially popular in Victorian times. Crystallizing or candying flowers to make decorative sweet treats was especially popular.
- The Aztecs used marigolds in their religious ceremonies and as a medicine to treat hiccups.
- When we eat a head of broccoli, we are actually eating the plant's flower buds!



Do you think there is a distinct line between the vegetable garden and the flower garden? Think again! Some plants bear edible blossoms that can add color and zing to dishes and drinks as well as beauty to the garden. Below are descriptions of easy-to-grow plants bearing edible flowers. These are best grown in among your vegetables or in containers. Be sure to label them at planting time; this is especially important if you choose to grow them in a garden bed with non-edible flowers.

Important notes:

- Not all flowers are edible! Some are poisonous, including common garden flowers like datura and foxglove. Teach children to check with you or another knowledgeable adult before eating flowers.
- Be mindful of possible allergic reactions. Those with seasonal allergies may want to avoid eating flowers.
- Make sure that the flowers and nearby plants haven't been treated with pesticides.
- Go slow when introducing children to edible flowers by offering them in small quantities, one type at a time.
- In most cases, eat only the petals. Avoid eating the pistils and stamens, which are often bitter and may contain pollen that can trigger allergic reactions.

Tips:

Harvest flowers in the morning after the dew has dried.

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If possible, eat the flowers soon after they're picked. They can be stored in the refrigerator for several days if you gently wrap them in a moist paper towel and place in a sealed bag or airtight container.

Harvest flowers regularly to encourage the plants to continue blooming.

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All of the plants are annuals that grow for one season, with the exception of chives, which is a perennial that will live from year to year. All do best in well-drained soil in full sun.

Borage (*Borago officinalis*) There are so many reasons to grow borage! Its lovely sky-blue, star-shaped flowers add a beautiful color note to the garden, and they are also a magnet for visiting bees. The flowers have a faint, cucumber-like taste. Try scattering some atop a salad or freezing individual blossoms within ice cubes to add to summer drinks.

Borage is easy to grow from direct-sown seed. Plant seeds after your last spring frost date, placing seeds $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ inch deep and 6 inches apart. When seedlings are established, thin plants to stand 12 to 18 inches apart. Mature plants will reach about 2 to 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ feet tall. Let some of the flowers go to seed and borage will happily resow itself from year to year.

Nasturtium (*Tropaeolum majus*) There is a gardener's saying that you should "be nasty to nasturtiums." This refers to the fact that these sturdy plants will thrive in the poorest of soils. In fact, when grown in very fertile soil, they often produce a lush crop of leaves but few flowers. There are many varieties, with flowers in a range of colors, from creams and yellows to reds, oranges, and mahogany. The spurred blossoms are great for attracting hummingbirds to the garden. Both the leaves and flowers of nasturtiums are edible, with a pleasantly peppery taste. Scatter them as a colorful accent in salads, atop frosted cakes, anywhere a little color is needed.

Nasturtiums are easy to grow. Choose from vining varieties (great in a window box or hanging planter) or compact, mounding varieties. Sow seeds directly in the garden when the danger of frost is past and the soil is warm. Sow seeds 1 inch deep and about 6 inches apart. Thin to about 10 inches apart when seedlings are established. Plants can be started early indoors under lights in biodegradable pots (such as peat pots) 3 to 4 weeks before the setting out date for your area. Harden off plants before moving them outside and try to disturb the root system as little as possible when you set plants in the ground.

Signet Marigold (*Tagetes tenuifolia*; also called *T. signata*) The small, single flowers of the 'Gem' marigold series are considered the best for eating. 'Lemon Gem' sports bright yellow flowers; 'Tangerine Gem' is orange and 'Red Gem' is tomato-colored with a gold center. The flowers have a citrus scent and a slightly bitter taste with hints of citrus and spice. Pluck the petals off individually to eat; avoid eating the base of the flower, which is especially bitter.

Plants grow about 10 to 12 inches tall, with blossoms held above mounds of ferny foliage. Sow seeds outdoors after the last frost date about $\frac{1}{4}$ inch deep and 4 inches apart. Thin seedlings to 12 inches apart. You can also

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sow seeds indoors about 4 weeks before your last frost date. Set them outside when the soil is warm and the danger of frost is past.

Calendula (*Calendula officinalis*) Also called "pot marigold," calendula blooms in a range of hues, including brilliant golden-yellow, orange, and red. A sprinkle of petals adds color and a touch of tang to soups and salads as well as rice, egg, and pasta dishes. Calendula is sometimes referred to as "poor man's saffron," alluding to the similar taste and color it lends to foods.

Sow seeds outdoors 2 to 3 weeks before your last frost date; seedlings can tolerate a light frost. Or, get an early start by starting seeds indoors about 6 weeks before your last frost date. Sow seeds ½ inch deep and 4 inches apart; thin seedlings to about 12 inches apart. If flowering wanes and plants begin to look rangy in mid-summer, trim the stems back to about 6 inches and they'll re-grow, producing another crop of flowers into fall. Calendula readily self-sows; allow some flowers to mature and go to seed and you'll likely see seedlings popping up nearby the following spring.

Johnny-Jump-Up (*Viola tricolor*) These dainty little violas bloom in early spring. Their cheerful violet, mauve, white and yellow flowers have a wintergreen taste and make a lovely garnish. Flowers can also be candied. Plants flourish while the weather is cool and self-sow readily, coming back from year to year. Sow seeds early in the spring as soon as the soil can be worked (in the fall in mild winter areas), placing seeds ¼ inch deep. Seeds can take two to three weeks to germinate. Thin plants to 4 to 6 inches apart.

Chives (*Allium schoenoprasum*) The lavender flower heads of this familiar perennial herb are edible; not surprisingly, they have a mild, oniony flavor similar to the edible leaves. To use the flowers, pull the florets apart and sprinkle them on food as a colorful garnish. To start plants from seed, sow clusters of 6 to 10 seeds ¼ inch deep in early spring, leaving 8 to 10 inches between clusters. You can also start plants early indoors under lights 6 to 8 weeks before your last spring frost date and set hardened-off plants outside when they are a couple of inches tall.

Summer Squash (*Cucurbita pepo*) The flowers of summer squash and zucchini can be eaten raw in salads or cooked in a variety of ways. Their mildly sweet flavor lends itself to many culinary uses. They can be sautéed, stuffed and baked, dipped in batter and fried or added to dishes like casseroles, soups, pastas and frittatas. To prepare flowers for eating, give them a quick rinse, pat dry, and peel open gently to make sure there are no insect stowaways. To grow plants, sow seeds directly in the garden when the soil is warm and all danger of frost is past. Place 4 to 6 seeds 4 inches apart in a hill, thinning to the two strongest plants when seedlings are a few inches tall. Leave about 2 feet between the hills.

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