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If you love flowers and appreciate good food, why not consider combining them? Flowers are not only beautiful to look at; they can also add color, unique interest, and flavor to meals. Adding flowers to a dish is not a new practice, but it has again become an artful way to add flavor and color to your cuisine with blossoms from your own garden.

The flavor of flowers ranges from spicy to sweet to herbal; most are a milder form of their fragrance. Here is just a sampling of the myriad of wonderful edible blooms.

CALENDULA: Slightly bitter flavor. The petals are used mostly for color. Use for rice, chicken, soups, and baked goods.

CHIVES: Quite flavorful – oniony, but not too much so. Break the flower into individual florets. Very versatile, use for herbal vinegar.

NASTURTIUM: Great spicy, peppery flavor. Both blossoms and leaves are edible. Use for salads, vegetables, pasta, and meat dishes.

VIOLAS OR PANSIES: Use the whole flower for its wintergreen flavor. Use as garnishes, in salads, desserts, or soups.

CULINARY SAGE: The flavor of the flowers is more subtle than the leaves. Use in salads, soups, chicken, and fish dishes.

MARIGOLDS: All varieties have edible blooms such as Lemon Gem and Tangerine Gem. The flavor is a combination of citrus and spice. Use only the petals in salads, eggs, and soups as the base of the blooms can be very bitter.

BEE BALM: A blend of flavors, citrus, sweet, hot, and mint. Pull individual tubular shaped blooms from the flower head. Use in jams and jellies, baked goods, desserts, and salads.

BORAGE: A mild cucumber-like flavor. Delightful frozen in ice cubes for use in summer drinks. Great candied. Use in salads or as garnishes.

SCARLET RUNNER BEAN: A delicate bean-like flavor with a slight crunch. Nice garnish for soups, salads, and vegetable dishes.

A rule of thumb: If the edible flower has a large calyx (base), remove the petals, as the calyx usually does not enhance the blooms flavor.

Using Flowers in Your Kitchen

- It's important to know where your flowers come from. It is preferable that they come from your own garden or a reputable grower where you can be sure that they are not sprayed. You may even find edible flowers in the produce section of your grocery store, along with fresh herbs and salad greens.
- For best flavor, always use flowers at their peak. Don't use faded or wilted flowers, as they tend to taste bitter. Never use flowers that have been sprayed with pesticides.
- Rinse flowers gently in a basin of cool water to remove any insects that may be hiding. Pat flowers dry. It is best to use the flowers immediately, but if you need to store them temporarily, place them between slightly dampened paper towels in a plastic bag in the refrigerator.
- When serving flowers to those who are not used to eating them, don't overwhelm them with large, entire blooms. Instead, pull off petals or florets and scatter them lightly over a dish.
- Some of the nicest ways to use edible flowers are also the simplest. Garnishes of fresh picked blossoms can even turn leftovers into something special. Salads are probably the best place to start adding flowers to your meals. The addition of blooms to your salad can turn it from mundane to showstopper. Homegrown, tender, tiny lettuces and other greens are the most delicious. To this add a few blooms or petals. Don't use too many varieties. Keep it simple; three to five is a good number.

When combining greens and flowers, keep in mind two things: what the salad will look like on a plate and how the flavors will blend. You should look for a harmonious blend of colors and flavors. Add a light, uncomplicated dressing of olive oil and lemon juice, and you have a glorious presentation.

Remember, the possibilities for using edible flowers in your cuisine are limited only by your flavor preferences and imagination. Forget the old adage to “Please don’t eat the daisies.” Flowers can be delicious, and they add elegance to fancy fare or a special lift to even the simplest meal.

CAUTION: Be sure to follow only these specific suggestions. Not all flowers are edible and great care must be exercised in identifying edible varieties.

Blooming Summer Salad

About 4 cups of salad greens (baby lettuces, spinach, mache, chicory, endive, arugula, or watercress)

About 2 cups of assorted edible flowers (calendula petals, nasturtium blossoms, scarlet runner bean blossoms, marigold petals, borage)

1 tbsp. snipped chives

1/4 cup olive oil

1-2 tbsp. herb vinegar

salt and freshly ground pepper

Wash the salad greens and pat or spin them dry. Gently rinse the flowers and pat them dry. In a small bowl, whisk the vinegar and oil. Season with salt and pepper.

Arrange greens in a serving bowl. Scatter the chives over them. Place flowers decoratively on top. Drizzle with the vinaigrette. Toss gently and serve immediately.

This simple salad is a smashing presentation and an easy way to get started using edible flowers in your own kitchen.

Rev. 8/2013 peg