

EDIBLE ORNAMENTALS

Many gardeners have found a new and renewed interest in backyard vegetable gardening. Did you know that there are also a vast number of ornamental plants that have edible leaves, flowers, and/or roots? Here are just a few examples.

Edible Flowers

Many common annuals with edible flowers include *Nasturtium*, *Calendula*, Pansy/Viola, Snapdragons, Primroses, Sunflowers, English Daisies (*Bellis*), Bachelor Buttons (*Centaurea*), and Impatiens.

In addition, many perennials have edible flowers such as Mallow (*Malva*), *Lavatera*, Lavender, Wild violets (*Viola odorata*), Chrysanthemums, *Dianthus*, including Carnations.

Many bulb-forming plants have edible flowers such as *Gladilolas*, and true lilies in the genus *Lilium*, e.g. Tiger Lily, Stargazer Lily, Casablanca Lily. Daylilies are one of my favorite edible flowers, and the unopened flower buds are a tasty, nutty treat in salads.

Shrubby plants with edible flowers include *Hibiscus*, Roses, as well as all *Pelargoniums* like Martha Washington geraniums, Scented Geraniums and common Zonal Geraniums. Many vining plants also have edible flowers such as Japanese Honeysuckle (*Lonicera japonica*), True Jasmine (i.e. in the genus *Jasminum*), and Passionflowers (*Passiflora*).

When eating flowers, a safe bet is to not eat tons of flowers at one time. Cut flowers in a florist bouquet should never be eaten, because they have likely been treated or sprayed in the greenhouse where they were grown.

Edible Leaves

Many ornamental perennials have edible foliage that may be added to salads like Mallow (*Malva*), *Lavatera*, most *Campanulas*, and the young leaves and shoots of *Houttunyyia*. The leaves of Scented Geraniums mentioned above many be used in tea or sparingly used fresh in salads.

Many ornamentals perennials have leaves that may be used in teas like Bee Balm (*Monarda*), *Agastache*, *Oxalis*, Violets, *Echinacea*, just to name a few. Then, of course, there is *Camellia sinensis*, the leaves of which are used for “green tea.”

Edible Fruits

Did you realize that those reddish burgundy fruits that fall off your Brush Cherry (*Eugenia*) hedge are actually edible. Though I don't find them incredibly tasty, they may be eaten fresh or made into jams. Another common landscaping staple, the Natal Plum (*Carissa*) produces an edible fruit, though the seeds are considered not edible. Make sure the fruits are dark red, soft, and ripe, so that less latex is present.

And yes the fruits of your Strawberry Tree (*Arbutus unedo*) are edible! I have gotten totally stuffed eating the grainy-textured, red, spherical fruits that are neither too tart or too sweet. In addition, many species of *Eleagnus* have small edible fruits.

Edible Roots & Tubers

Many ornamentals have edible roots and tubers like Hollyhocks (*Alcea rosea*), and many *Campanulas*. The ornamental Sweet Potato Vine (*Ipomoea*) does make an edible tuber, as does the Mexican native bulb *Tigridia*, and Indian Shot or edible Canna (*Canna edulis*).

The common butterfly bush (*Asclepias tuberosa*), commonly bought as a monarch butterfly host, has an edible tuber that when cooked has a nutty flavor; the young flowers buds and shoots are also edible.

Before Eating...

Do not ornamental plants that have been treated with systemic controls or chemicals not intended for edible plants. Many ornamentals are grown not for the intention of consumption. After planting, let them grow for awhile before eating them. And remember that some edible plants must be cooked first.

Be sure you have positively identified your plants before eating them. Feel free to bring any plant samples to an independent garden center like Walter Andersen Nursery to have them identified. They will happily help you have some fun this year with edible ornamentals!