

Please Eat
the Flowers





PHOTOS COURTESY OF RENEE'S GARDEN SEEDS

Beauty and the feast: Nasturtiums (opposite) and other common garden blossoms add pizzazz to summer sandwiches.

Edible blossoms pack a punch in the garden and the kitchen

BY RENEE SHEPHERD Using flowers in cooking is a practice that dates all the way back to the Roman Empire. It became widespread in the Middle Ages and continued in popularity through the Victorian era. These days, many restaurant chefs are reviving this culinary art, using flower petals and blossoms to add both flavor and beauty to their menus.

 Growing edible flowers and using vegetable and culinary herb blossoms expands the pleasure of cooking from the garden. Their flavors range from spicy to sweet — a milder form of their leaves, fruit or fragrance. They add a decorative and delicious touch to everyday cooking and elegance to special-occasion dishes. 

One cautionary note about using flowers in the kitchen: Choose ONLY varieties that you're completely certain are edible, and be absolutely sure they were grown without toxic sprays — preferably in your own garden! Also be mindful of potential allergic reactions, particularly from pollen.

EDIBLE FLOWERS

Sweet Roses in the Kitchen

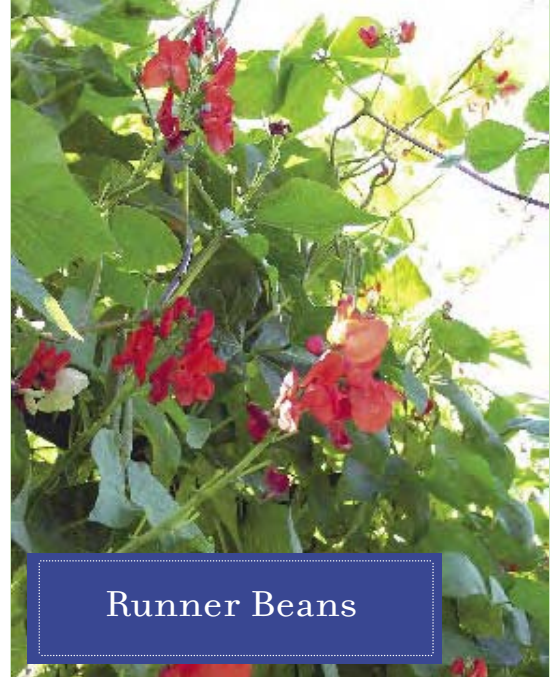
ROSES ARE THE MOST BELOVED of all cultivated flowers, but most of us don't think of using their marvelous fragrances in everyday cooking. In fact, roses have added their rich scented perfumes to confections, casseroles and beverages in Europe, Asia and the Middle East for centuries. The aroma and flavor of roses vary from variety to variety, ranging from faint and elusive to heady and richly sweet. All are edible, with true rose taste and differing overtones of apple, cinnamon, orange or lemon. Older varieties tend to have more flavor than newer hybrids; in general, the stronger the fragrance, the stronger the flavor.

Good choices for edible rose blossoms include *Rosa rugosa*, *R. damascena*, *R. x alba* and *R. eglanteria*. Classic, more modern roses with especially sweet petals include 'Tiffany,' 'Chrysler Imperial,' 'Double Delight,' 'Fragrant Cloud' and 'White Lightning.' Or choose old favorites like 'Cécile Brunner,' 'Belinda,' 'Zéphirine

All roses are edible. In general, the stronger the fragrance, the stronger the flavor.

Drouhin,' 'La Reine Victoire,' 'Prince Camille de Rohan,' 'Étoile de Hollande' and 'Eglantine.' It's important to smell and taste roses before using them to determine which are the most appealing to your palate. Be absolutely sure how they were grown, and never use florist-grown roses that may have been treated with chemicals. Many older roses are good edible candidates, as are newer landscaping varieties that are disease-resistant and thus need no spraying in most climates.

To prepare roses for use in cooking, pick them early in the day just as they come into bloom. Rinse them well, then shake off the excess water or spin them gently in a salad spinner. With a good pair of scissors, snip off the petals and then trim off the white part at the base of each petal; it has a bitter taste and must be removed before you proceed. Prepared this way, rose petals can be used to make jelly and jam, vinegar, flavored honey, syrup and tea, or simply as a garnish for cakes, salads and desserts. For a sample of rose petal recipes, go to www.ppplants.com.



Runner Beans

Scarlet runner vines produce juicy beans — and blossoms — that are great on the plate.

Nasturtiums for Color and Spice

EVERY KITCHEN GARDEN SHOULD include showy and flavorful nasturtiums. They come in a wide range of saucy colors, and both the leaves and flowers are delicious — mildly spicy like watercress with a hint of honey. Grow all eight colors of 'Whirlybird,' bright 'Amazon Jewels,' pastel yellow 'Moonlight,' creamy 'Vanilla Berry' or brilliant 'Empress of India.' I chop the petals and add them in a confetti of color to rice, potatoes, pasta or green salads. Mix the petals into cream cheese or other sandwich spreads and tuck them into lunch-box tuna sandwiches. Nasturtium flowers go especially well with seafood; add them to crab or shrimp salads and use them to garnish grilled or poached salmon. The flowers also can be steeped in mild rice or cider vinegar to add a bit of spice.

Nasturtiums are very easy and forgiving flowers to grow from seed. They thrive in most gardens and actually flower best in poor soil. The unusually rich colors of nasturtium cultivars range from pale primrose yellow to orange, bright vermilion and deep mahogany. Plants can be either softly mounding, about 18 inches across, or trailing varieties that can be trained up short trellises. They will obligingly fill in garden edges and bare spots or drape from containers. Their effect is both lovely and luxurious. Different varieties offer leaf colors including dark green, blue-green and even variegated green and white, all with pretty lily-pad-shaped leaves.



Roses

Petals from 'Angel Wings' and dozens of other roses can be used to make jams, teas, flavored honey and garnishes. Never use roses that may have been treated with chemicals.

Share Your Scarlet Runner Blossoms With Hummingbirds

SCARLET RUNNERS ARE HEIRLOOM beans whose flowers are scrumptious edibles not everyone thinks to utilize. Scarlet runner beans have brilliant red blossoms with a rich beany flavor; there is also an heirloom variety, 'Painted Lady,' that is a lovely cream-and-coral. They make a tasty and colorful garnish for even the most mundane green salad, or use them to garnish a plate of cold cuts or open-faced sandwiches.

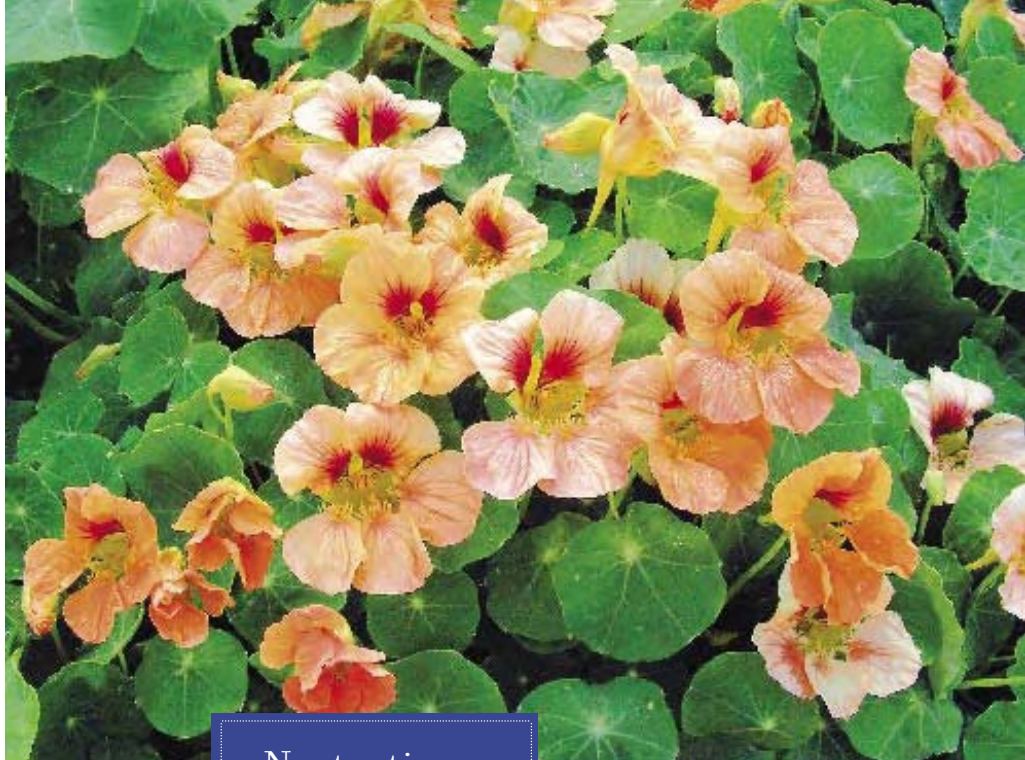
Runner bean vines produce abundant flowers, and hummingbirds adore drinking their nectar. I always plant an extra-long row to share with the beautiful and feisty hummers that flock to the blossoms each season. These great vines are a perfect choice for gardening with children. Make some simple pole tripods and plant six or seven beans around each pole. They will soon vine up and make a leafy teepee into which little children can crawl. The handsome flowers are followed by juicy bean pods that are good eating if harvested at six or seven inches long; remember to pull the strings off the pods before cooking.

Edible Annual Flowers for Garden Beds

■ **Antique petite Signet marigolds**, *Tagetes signata*, grow quickly from seed into neat 12- to 18-inch mounds whose lacy foliage is soon covered by masses of dainty half-inch single flowers. The flowers and foliage have a scent something like lemon verbena, much different than the strong odor of common marigolds. These non-fussy, heat-tolerant, long-blooming flowers add a bright touch of color to vegetables, pastas or salads. Look for varieties like 'Lemon' or 'Orange Gem,' or grow Signet 'Starfire' for a mix of three colors.

■ **All annual calendula varieties**, *C. officinalis*, are edible. The sunny golden and orange flower petals lend a delicate flavor and color to both egg and cheese dishes, add a saffron-like nuance to rice dishes and breads, and make colorful additions to salads. Long-lasting and free-flowering, calendulas bloom well in cooler weather, before and after other summer annuals. Easily sown directly from seed, they all grow about a foot and a half tall and bloom profusely in sunny conditions.

■ **Old-fashioned heartsease**, *Viola tricolor*, has pretty little one-inch flowers that look like miniature pansies with faces



Nasturtiums



ABOVE: Nasturtiums are easy to grow from seed, and they provide a bonanza of garden color. Varieties include (clockwise from top) 'Creamsicle,' 'Spitfire,' 'Cherries Jubilee' and 'Vanilla Berry.'
BELOW: Chive blossoms can be pulled apart into florets that provide a subtle onion flavor.

Chives



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of deep violet, mauve, yellow and white. The blossoms have a faint wintergreen taste that is mild and pleasant; use them as a garnish with cheese plates or sliced fruit, or to decorate cakes. The blossoms also can be candied for special occasions. Simply paint them with slightly beaten egg whites, sprinkle them with fine granulated sugar and let them dry. Weather-tolerant and long-blooming, Johnny-jump-ups grow six to eight inches tall and readily self-sow.

Chive Blossom Bounty

THE BLOSSOMS OF YOUR CULINARY herb plants can be treasures in the kitchen. Chive flowers are my favorite. The spiky lavender-pink blossoms shining above the grassy green leaves have a special eye-catching appeal when the plants bloom in early summer. Just cut off the whole blossoms and pull apart the flowers into individual florets. Sprinkle them over omelets or scrambled eggs, all cheese dishes, potatoes, rice or cooked vegetables — anywhere a subtle onion flavor is desired.

I especially like to sprinkle chive florets over thin slices of cucumbers. The lavender color adds contrast and delicious taste to the cool, pale, crispy flesh of fresh cucumbers. Chive blossoms also make tasty and pretty additions to a salad of fresh orange slices and thinly sliced fennel bulbs dressed with a mild vinaigrette, or sprinkle the florets over a freshly made pea, creamy broccoli, carrot or winter squash soup.

Herb Blossoms: Tasty Garden Helpers

THE BLOSSOMS OF DILL, ARUGULA, thyme, fennel, oregano, basil and garlic chives are all attractive and savory when sprinkled over salads, soups or open-faced sandwiches. Letting your herbs set flowers is good gardening practice as well; most blossoms attract beneficial insects and pollinators. Honeybees will delight in your herb flowers, and their efforts ensure that your other vegetable and flower plants are fruitful and productive.

Renee Shepherd has years of experience in finding the best seed varieties for American kitchen gardeners. She tests varieties at her own trial gardens and offers her seed line through independent garden centers. You can also order online at www.reneegarden.com.



COURTESY OF RENEES GARDEN

The Recipes

Blossom Tea Sandwiches

- One large cucumber, peeled, seeded and finely chopped
- 8 ounces cream cheese ("light" style OK) at room temperature
- 3/4 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce
- 1/4 teaspoon minced garlic
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1/4 cup finely chopped chives or scallions
- Thinly sliced cracked wheat or white bread, crusts removed
- Lots of edible blossoms: nasturtiums, chives, borage, calendula, bean flowers or herb blossoms, rinsed and patted dry

Squeeze chopped cucumber in a kitchen towel to remove as much moisture as possible; set aside. Blend the cream cheese, seasonings and chives or scallions. Add cucumber and combine well but do not overmix. Spread on bread and cut into finger-sized open sandwiches. To serve: Decorate the tops of the sandwiches with petals of various edible flowers.

Cheesy Chive Blossom Omelet

- Four eggs
- 1 teaspoon water
- 1/4 teaspoon salt, or to taste
- 1/8 teaspoon white pepper
- 1 teaspoon chopped fresh parsley
- 1 tablespoon unsalted butter
- Three young chive blossoms, broken into individual florets
- 2 tablespoons grated Swiss cheese
- Garnish: whole chive blossoms

In a small bowl, whisk eggs, water, salt, pepper and parsley. Melt butter in a 10-

inch omelet pan over high heat until butter sizzles but has not started to brown. Pour in egg mixture, shaking pan immediately. Using the flat side of a fork, stir eggs and move and tilt pan in a circular motion until eggs begin to set. Sprinkle chive florets and cheese down the center; allow cheese to melt slightly, then fold omelet over and serve. Garnish with blossoms. Serves two.

Baby Squash, Nasturtium Blossoms and Herbs with Pasta

- 18-20 nasturtium flowers
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh thyme
- 1 tablespoon fresh sweet marjoram
- 1/4 cup chopped Italian broadleaf parsley
- Four scallions, very finely chopped
- Three small garlic cloves, minced
- 1/4 cup fresh basil, coarsely chopped
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter, softened
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Six baby yellow scallop squashes with their blossoms
- Six baby zucchini squashes with their blossoms
- 1/2 cup chicken stock
- Fettucine noodles for two people

Separate the nasturtium petals from their bases, discard bases and chop the petals coarsely. Blend with chopped herbs, scallions, garlic and butter, and season with salt and pepper to taste. Allow the herb butter to stand for a half-hour to let the flavors blend. Cut the squashes into thin slices and the blossoms into strips. In a skillet, melt 2 tablespoons of the herb butter and sauté the squash for three minutes. Add the chicken stock and squash blossoms and simmer over low heat for a few minutes. Heat salted water for the pasta and cook the pasta until done to your taste. Drain pasta well and add with the rest of the herb butter to the squash. Correct seasonings, mix well, garnish and serve immediately.