Production

It is important to remember that edible flowers are only part of a diversification strategy. Most growers cannot make a living on growing only edible flowers. Instead, these are grown in conjunction with cut flowers, herbs, and specialty lettuces, in order to complement these items and create opportunities for value-added products.

Another thing to keep in mind when producing edible flowers is the importance of growing without chemicals, since the flowers should be free of any chemical residue. Small-scale, organic growers have an edge, because flowers supplied by commercial florists—usually imported—are often grown with heavy application of pesticides. In fact, many imported cut flowers may contain residues from pesticides ruled unacceptable for food production in the U.S.

It is estimated that perhaps 100 types of common garden flowers are both edible and palatable. See the enclosures for a complete listing. The most popular edible flowers include:

- Nasturtium
- Violet
- Tulip
- Calendula
- Bachelor button
- Lavender
- Marigold
- Rose
- Daylily
- Chrysanthemum
- Chive flowers
- Bee balm
- Pansy
- Dianthus
- Squash blossom
- Borage
- Viola
- Hibiscus

Flowers are rich in nectar and pollen, and some are high in vitamins and minerals. For instance, roses—especially rose hips—are very high in vitamin C, and marigolds and nasturtiums also contain vitamin C. Dandelion blossoms not only contain vitamins A and C, but are high in phosphorus as well. Flowers are also nearly calorie-free.

Cultural requirements for edible flowers are similar to those of other floral crops. Production tips and culinary uses are given in the book *The Salad Garden* by Joy Larkcom (1). The ATTRA publication *Sustainable Cut Flower Production* gives references that may be useful in the culture of edible flowers.

Poisonous Flowers

Eating any flower is not recommended unless you are certain about its identity, and even edible flowers can cause indigestion if eaten in large amounts. The flower must not be toxic (e.g., larkspur, foxglove, buttercup, bleeding heart, lily-of-the-valley, etc.). See the enclosures for a
list of some toxic flowers and a list the American Association of Poison Control Centers that have access to an on-line database of information on poisonous plants.

Marketing

As with any crop, it is extremely important to decide on a marketing strategy before planting. Edible flowers are produced and marketed in much the same way as herbs, although the market for edible flowers is not as large as the market for herbs. Edible flowers are used by some contemporary chefs as garnishes, in salads and desserts, and for drink and candy adornment. Do a careful market assessment before proceeding, concentrating on up-scale restaurants in the largest urban center nearest you.

In order to recognize the unique opportunities that may provide entry into this market, the grower must keep up with food trends. Talking to local chefs will acquaint the grower with their needs. Most restaurants demand a consistent supply of any crop, but many edible flowers can be used interchangeably. Get in touch with a local chefs’ association or state restaurant association. Reading magazines such as Gourmet, Bon Appetit, and Food and Wine is another way to anticipate the competitive environment.

Since many people will be unfamiliar with using edible flowers, it is always a good idea to provide free samples and free recipes. Remind your customers that edible flowers can be mixed in with summer salads for unique color and taste. Often, customers will use these flowers for special events, for example, placing crystallized violets on wedding cakes. It is up to the grower to remind consumers of these special uses. As for pricing, the grower must decide what the market will bear. In general, prices for edible flowers have dropped in the past couple of years, due to a lack of demand. Value-added products, like mesclun mixed with calendula flowers, can generate excitement for the consumer and added income for the grower. (Contact ATTRA for information on mesclun and lettuce production methods.) Other examples of value-added products are gift baskets, pre-packaged salads, and processed products (such as teas). The enclosed article "Growing Herbs as a Small-Farm Cash Crop" gives suggestions about direct marketing of herbs and edible flowers.

The ATTRA publication Herb Overview, which includes an extensive resource list, may also generate ideas for the marketing of edible flowers. Please contact ATTRA and request this publication if you would like further details about the business of herbs, or view it at our web site at <http://www.attra.org/attra-pub/ herb.html>. Request the ATTRA publication Lavender as an Alternative Farming Enterprise for more suggestions.

Resources

Ecology Action, a California-based organization, has published the booklet Dried, Cut and Edible Flowers for Pleasure, Food and Income (2). This booklet contains an extensive chart of edible flower characteristics including common and botanical names, appropriate plant spacing, flower colors, parts of the plant used, bloom time, flavor, and recipes for many species.
There are several cookbooks that describe the flavors of edible flowers and their use in cooking. For instance, The Forgotten Art of Flower Cookery (3) discusses culinary uses of flowers. Rosalind Creasy, a well-known author on the topic of edible landscaping, has written the book Cooking from the Garden, which is out of print but may be available from your local library or through inter-library loan. This publication offers not only recipes for edible flowers, but information on inedible, or unpalatable, types and what compounds they contain. Consult the Resources section below for other books.

The Association of Specialty Cut Flower Growers (ASCFG) (4) may be another source of information. Though the focus of the organization is cut flower production, the members typically produce a wide variety of field-grown floral crops, and some cultivate edible flowers as well. The group produces a number of publications and a newsletter (The Cut Flower Quarterly), sponsors a national conference each year, and provides information specific to local conditions through the assistance of the associations' regional directors. The ASCFG membership directory gives a thumbnail description of each member's operation, along with the crops they grow. It also lists cut flower buyers, suppliers, consultants, and educators.

References:

   Widely available.

   Available for $8.00 plus $2.50 shipping from:  
   Bountiful Gardens  
   18001 Shafer Ranch Rd.  
   Willits, CA  95490  
   (707) 459-6410  
   64–page free catalog is also available.

   Available for $15.95 + $3.95 shipping from:  
   Pelican Publishing Co., Inc.  
   P.O. Box 3110  
   Gretna, LA 70054  
   (504) 368-1175

4) Association of Specialty Cut Flower Growers (ASCFG)  
   Judy Laushman, Executive Director  
   M.P.O. Box 268  
   Oberlin, OH  44074  
   (440) 774-2887; Fax: (440) 774–2435  
   <http://www.ascfg.org>
Enclosures:


Resources:


Resources: (continued)


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