

Flower Power: What Can Edible Flowers Do for Your Health?

Analysis by [Dr. Joseph Mercola](#)

✓ Fact Checked

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Flowers have a long history of use in traditional medicine and were often used against illnesses. Without recordings of the botanicals used in traditional medicine by physicians and herbalists, modern medicine would not have evolved as we know it today
- › Many of the health benefits ascribed to eating flowers come from their vitamin and mineral content as well as antioxidant activity and anti-inflammatory properties
- › Take care to only eat flowers you can positively identify since some can trigger digestive problems and others are poisonous and even deadly; never eat flowers you purchase from a florist or garden center or harvested from the side of the road and they likely were sprayed with pesticides not labeled for food
- › Several flowers with health benefits include violets, roses, moringa flowers, jasmine, lavender and pansies; while sold as vegetables, broccoli, artichoke and cauliflower are flowering plants

You may appreciate the display of vibrant colors and blossoms during the spring and summer months. But did you know some of those same flowers can benefit your health and wellness? Many of the health benefits ascribed to eating flowers come from their vitamin and mineral content as well as antioxidant activity and anti-inflammatory properties.¹

Flowers have a long history of use in traditional medicine. Medicinal plants were often used against illnesses and contemporary science uses plants in a range of drugs. In

fact, without recordings of the botanicals used in traditional medicine by physicians and herbalists, modern medicine would not have evolved as we know it today.

A 2017 phytotherapy study² in a province in Ecuador interviewed 84 ancestral healers and asked about the species used in their traditional medicine. The researchers found the native Ecuadorians had a vast variety of medicinal practices and traditions and that chamomile had the highest prevalence of the species in the study.

It is important to take care before eating any wild plant. According to a report from the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew,³ there are 391,000 species of vascular plants and 369,000 of those produce flowers. Additionally, it's estimated 2,000 new species are discovered or described every year. Of these nearly 400,000 plants, 31,000 have at least one documented use.

Flower-Power: Food Uses and Health Benefits

After years of use in traditional medicine, there's an increasing appreciation of the health benefits found in edible flowers. A 2020 study⁴ found the leaves of the psidium guajava plant were high in protein. A 2022 study⁵ published in *Nutrients* found edible flowers of the Asteraceae family had high levels of dietary fiber and the data showed edible flowers had as much as some of the best known high fiber foods.

The researchers suggested that 1 tablespoon of freeze-dried calendula petals had 7.44 grams of fiber, and consuming 3 tablespoons could meet the RDA of 25 grams per day. This list is just a sample of the types of flowers that are tasty and offer health benefits.

Chamomile — Often used as a calming tea to help people sleep, chamomile flowers are also good for inflammation, menstrual disorders, ulcers, wound healing and rheumatic pain.⁶ Dried flowers are used to make chamomile tea and essential oils are used in cosmetics and aromatherapy. People with a history of pollen allergies and infants and young children should avoid chamomile.

Violets – These delicate blue-purple flowers are used topically for eczema, psoriasis, acne and cradle cap in babies. Taken internally, it is helpful for cystitis and as an expectorant, diuretic and anti-inflammatory.⁷ Also known as sweet violet, the parts growing above ground are used to treat hot flashes during menopause, depression, digestive complaints and some respiratory tract conditions.⁸ Violet petals can be used to garnish green spring salads or as a calming tea.

Roses – Not just for Valentine's Day, the medicinal properties of these flowers include skin disorders, acne, and digestive issues. Rose petals are high in antioxidants, the chief of which are polyphenols.⁹ Dried rose petals can be used to make calming, caffeine-free, antioxidant-rich tea that boosts your intake of calcium, iron and vitamin C.¹⁰

Moringa flowers – Moringa flowers hang in clusters off the Moringa tree, which blossoms year-round in tropical climates.¹¹ They are a source of vitamins A, C, potassium, and amino acids. The flowers can be eaten raw or lightly cooked. Nearly all parts of the Moringa tree are edible and have strong therapeutic properties, suggesting it can be used as a functional ingredient in food.¹²

Jasmine flower – Jasmine is called the "Queen of Flowers" and is widely popular for its scent and medicinal benefits.¹³ It has been an ancient and traditional remedy as a mood enhancer and to improve brain function. Jasmine has been used to treat liver pain from cirrhosis, pain from severe diarrhea, and liver disease.¹⁴

It is known to increase relaxation and as an aphrodisiac. The pharmaceutical industry uses it in the production of some medications, and it's used in foods to flavor beverages, desserts and baked goods.

Saffron – Saffron is a spice that is hand-harvested from the crocus flower. Once harvested it is sold in thread form or ground to a powder and used in tea or health supplements. Saffron helps lower inflammation, improve mood and may help with

heart disease, cancer, Alzheimer's disease and diabetes.¹⁵ It has also been traditionally used in the treatment of sexual dysfunction and reproductive health.

Lavender — These fragrant purple blossoms have played a role as a health jack-of-all-trades in traditional medicine because of several chemicals, including flavonoids, coumarin and linalool.¹⁶ Data suggest it supports sleep, lowers pain and inflammation, improves mood, relieves menstrual cramps, reduces colic symptoms in infants and has antimicrobial and antiviral properties.

Calendula — These are sometimes confused with marigolds because they are called pot marigolds or common marigolds.¹⁷ However, they are not true marigolds. While Calendula is edible, only some species of marigold are edible.

The calendula has high amounts of flavonoid antioxidants¹⁸ that help protect against free radicals, as well as antimicrobial, antiviral and anti-inflammatory properties. It has traditionally been used to help heal wounds, relieve menstrual cramps, treat stomach upset and improve skin hydration and firmness.

Pumpkin blossom — Pumpkin flowers are a rich source of folate, magnesium, vitamin A, carotene, and choline.¹⁹ The flower is a rich source of antioxidants that help prevent chronic disease. They have a very short shelf life and are not readily available in stores.

Dandelion — The dandelion may be a weed in your yard, but it's full of iron, zinc, potassium and vitamins A, B, C and D.²⁰ The entire plant is edible. The leaves are used in salads and teas, the roots can be used as a coffee substitute and the flowers are a tasty addition to your salad and can be used to make wine. Dandelion flowers have antioxidant properties that may help support your immune system.

Pansies — Studies²¹ have identified nutritional differences in the flowers with different colors and depending on the stage of development of the flower. However, the flower has varying levels of flavonoids, monomeric anthocyanins and antioxidant activity from bud to full bloom.

Begonia – Tuberos and bedding begonias have a slightly citrus or tangy flavor that adds beautiful color and flavor to a bowl of greens.²² The flowers are a good source of vitamin C and have known antimicrobial and antifungal properties. They are effective in mitigating premenstrual syndrome and in the treatment of severe digestive disorders.

Chrysanthemums – The flower is best known as mums and is used to mitigate symptoms of Type 2 diabetes, colds, headache and high blood pressure.²³ It is a popular summer tea in China and rich in flavonoids, betaine, choline and vitamin B1. Some of the health benefits also include easing stress and anxiety, protecting against oxidative damage and supporting healthy immune function.²⁴

While they are sold as vegetables, broccoli, artichokes and cauliflower are really flowers. Broccoli and cauliflower florets are tightly grouped buds. If you leave them in the garden, those buds open into multiple tiny flowers that have a mild spicy flavor and make a surprisingly tasty addition to salads.

Warning: Not All Flowers Are Edible

It may seem from this list that most flowers are edible but as delicious and nutritious as some are, others can be dangerous. Your safest bet is to grow your own flowers for eating or purchase them at a market. If you choose to go foraging, consult with a local herbalist since some flowers have wild look-a-likes that can be poisonous.

You should also not assume that all landscape flowers are edible. And even edible flowers should be eaten in moderation. Additionally, you should only eat flowers that have not been sprayed with any type of pesticide or herbicide. Because the petals are delicate, the chemicals will not wash off. Steer clear of consuming the following flowers.

- **Lily of the Valley** – If ingested, it can cause vomiting and stomach cramps.

- **Monkshood** – The botanical name for this poisonous plant is *Aconitum*, which is also known as aconite, wolf’s bane, devil’s helmet and queen of poisons. This highly toxic plant was believed to be behind a mass poisoning in an Ontario restaurant in September 2022.²⁵ Each part of the plant contains toxins, the deadliest of which is aconite.
- ***Ageratina altissima*** – From North America, this snowy white, delicate plant called white snakeroot contains tremetol, which is so toxic that all it takes to make you very ill is to drink the milk from a cow that ate the plant.²⁶
- **Foxglove** – A favorite in old-fashioned gardens, with a beautiful profusion of bell-like flowers on tall, slender stalks, foxglove causes a wide range of symptoms, such as tremors, an irregular heartbeat and low blood pressure.²⁷ The entire plant – roots, flowers and even seeds – is poisonous.
- **Autumn crocus** – Originally from England, this lovely and familiar low-growing flower contains a toxic chemical called colchicine, which causes a burning sensation in your mouth and throat, diarrhea and, in worst-case scenarios, heart attack, kidney failure and even death. The plant can be mistaken for wild garlic.²⁸

Dos and Don'ts to Incorporate Flowers in Your Diet

Flowers add panache and elegance to any meal. Here are a few key tips to keep in mind when flowers are on the menu.

Do

Only eat flowers you can identify.

Wash all flowers before you eat them; remove the stamen (tiny, dusty-looking and pollen-producing anthers) as some people are allergic. Just before eating, wash the petals in cool water, drain and place them on a paper towel.

Only eat flowers grown organically.

Introduce flowers in the diet slowly and one species at a time. Watch for allergic reactions and digestive issues.

Harvest your homegrown flowers in the morning when they are at the peak of color and firmness.

Keep the flowers in water or the refrigerator until you are ready to prepare the meal.

Don't

Do not eat flowers purchased from a florist, nursery or garden center since they are often treated with pesticides not labeled for food crops.

Do not eat flowers picked from the side of the road since they may also have been sprayed with herbicides.

Sources and References

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