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## THE GROWING EDGE

# Edible flowers are on the rise

Growing and eating ornamental blossoms is garnering interest.

Jolene Hansen

Eating the blossoms from ornamental plants isn't a new concept. History reveals that combining flowers and food was once the norm, but munching on blooms somehow fell out of favor. That began to change in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as cutting-edge chefs replaced their parsley garnish with edible petals, and adventurous diners took note. Fast forward to today, and edible flowers are enjoying a renaissance.



Chive blossoms  
Photo: Aimée Damman

Flowers have moved from the plate edge into the midst of culinary creations, contributing flavors and scents as integral as those of herbs or vegetables. Bartenders have resurrected the moniker "mixologists," a term dating back to the 1800s, incorporating flowers and floral infusions into their brews. Food shows and social media are spreading the news, and interest in edible flowers is growing. But today's consumers don't just want to eat them. They want to grow them, and they're interested in taste as much or more than looks.

### Trends underway in Europe

Peter van Wijgerden, a nurseryman from the Netherlands, latched onto the idea of promoting edible flowers in 2009. He introduced his Look & Taste concept at trade shows with a single plant — potted nasturtiums — and emphasized their culinary attributes. Though some in the industry didn't take the idea seriously at first, interest has changed dramatically in recent years. European consumers are actively seeking edible flowers, and growers and traders are responding.

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For van Wijgerden's Look & Taste line, the concept comes first and foremost. Then the flower and ornamental attributes come next. "Our concept is very good. It definitely is a growing market," van Wijgerden says. The line has expanded from nasturtiums to include eight additional varieties with two more being tested for 2017. Grown with minimal or no chemicals and certified for consumption, the plants are all offered at a single price point in 12-centimeter pots (roughly 4.7 inches).



Chefs and mixologists are using flowers for more than just decorative purposes. They are adding them to recipes and infusing them in cocktails.  
Photo: Dreamstime.com

"This year, the orders were 300 percent more than the year before, so it is trending in Europe," van Wijgerden says. "It is a small group of people who buy edible flowers, but they give a much better price than for normal bedding plants." The line is sold in Finland, Denmark, France, Switzerland, England, Germany and the Netherlands, reaching consumers through flower auctions, floral shops, garden centers and culinary/kitchen specialty stores. Other European growers are now following suit and adding edible flowers to their lines.

### U.S. interest on the rise

The allure of edible flowers in the burgeoning edibles segment hasn't been lost on U.S. growers and garden centers. At Seattle-based Swansons Nursery, where edible flowers are a long-standing offering, annual and edible buyer Liane Smith acknowledges edible flowers are gaining traction and attention. "Interest in edible flowers is still small, but definitely growing. Our edible flower sales easily doubled from 2015," she says.

Smith credits increasing interests in "foodie culture" and recipe sharing on social media as prime forces behind growing awareness of edible blooms and their use. "Customers are using them mostly in salads and in baking," she says. "Candied flowers to decorate baked treats is becoming much more popular. Nasturtiums are incredibly popular as a salad addition."



Peter van Wijgerden poses with the potted nasturtiums that helped launch his Look & Taste line.  
Photo courtesy of Peter van Wijgerden

### Consumer needs and expectations

Educating consumers on how to safely grow and use edible flowers is essential to successful sales. Meeting their expectations for growing methods is, too. Smith notes that customers are very concerned that edible flowers start to be organically grown, and Swansons shares that concern. "We merchandise the edible flowers in our veggie start section with the salad greens," Smith says. "We only offer naturally grown varieties in that section, even though there are many other varieties of flowers we carry that are technically edible."

### Flowers and guidance to get started

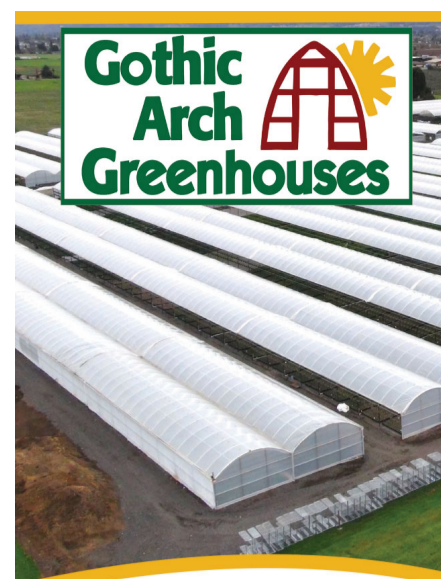
Edible flowers present numerous options, but some staples have proven to be favorites for chefs and consumers alike. At Swansons, the offering varies little from year to year. "Our core selections include violas, pansies, bachelor buttons, calendula, marigolds and nasturtiums," Smith says. "Violas are the best sellers." She notes that limited availability of organically grown flower starts also restricts the breadth of offerings.



The Look & Taste line started with one plant — potted nasturtiums — and has expanded as the popularity of edible flowers has grown.  
Photo courtesy of Peter van Wijgerden

At van Wijgerden, the Look & Taste line for 2017 will offer nasturtiums, borage, violas, agastache, salvia officinalis, calendula, flowering basil, centaurea and begonia. The nursery is also testing red-leaved oxalis and zataár, a Middle Eastern herb.

Jolene is a freelance writer and former hort professional based in Madison, Wis. She is a frequent contributor to GIE Media Horticulture Group publications.



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