

EATING NIAGARA: Pretty delicious, the power of edible flowers

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Jill Whitehead grows edible flowers at Niagara Botanical Co. in Beamsville. She is shown with snapdragons, which are edible. - Tiffany Mayer, Special to The St. Catharines Standard

Jill Whitehead has no problem if you stop and smell the roses in her garden.

The Hamilton resident who grows flowers on her grandparents' Beamsville farm would prefer it if you ate them, though.

Whitehead is the owner of Niagara Botanical Co., a blossoming enterprise based on easily the most beautiful food trend du jour: edible flowers.

She's turning marigolds, snapdragons and even roses from garden ornaments into kitchen staples that add flavour, texture and colour to smoothies and salads, cocktails and wedding cakes.

"It elevates food," Whitehead said about putting flowers on our plates. "It makes everything look nice."

One needs only to search 'smoothie bowl' on Instagram to see that's true. A few strategically placed nasturtiums or pansies can turn a dish of technicolour sludge into something to behold worth hundreds of likes. Since visiting Whitehead last week, I've been sprinkling mild bachelor button and marigold petals on everything, and it has made for pretty pictures.

The beauty of edible flowers runs more than petal deep, however. They do offer some nutrition. Chrysanthemums, dianthus and violas clock the high levels of potassium, according to the Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics.

Borage which tastes similar to cucumber, and nasturtium with its peppery notes, both boast solid amounts of vitamin C. And all that colour points to significant antioxidants in those noshable nasturtium, lavender, and bachelor buttons.

But you need more than just the odd bloom garnishing your green salad to do a body good. In some cases, it's up to a cup — or even a kilogram — before a dent is made in our recommended daily intake of nutrients.

Still, edible flowers have been used in food and medicine since antiquity, even if it's taken until the age of Instagram and the smoothie bowl to make them Whole Foods' No. 1 consumer food trend of the year for 2018.

"Social media is really doing this," Whitehead said about the growing hunger for her blossoms. "Everyone is posting smoothie bowls with violas."

Whitehead originally started growing cut flowers last year in her grandparents' former vineyard, but it wasn't long after harvesting her first stems that the request came from a local baker for edible blooms.

Over the winter, calls came from more local culinarians wanting vivid flowering herbs, bachelor buttons and roses to garnish their dishes. Whitehead's stunning shoots once destined for vases were bound to become eye candy on wedding cakes and salad plates instead.

"I thought maybe I should change my focus," she recalled. "It's been a really good decision. I love it so much more (than cut flowers) because I love food. For me, selling fun herbs or edible flowers is so cool."

It's also good for the consumer to have dedicated edible flower growers rather than turning to the impatiens they purchased at the neighbourhood garden centre when the urge strikes to gussy up dinner or dessert.

Some bakers had relied flower shop roses to dress up their creations. Problem is, they're often grown in countries that use pesticides banned in Canada. Florists may have also added chemical conditioners to blooms to keep them fresh on the flower shop floor.

Little about that sounded palatable or safe to Whitehead, who uses food-grade essential oils to keep the bugs off her blossoms.

But edible flowers aren't just the domain of the small-scale grower.

Not far from Whitehead's flower patch, Beamsville's Freeman Herbs is gearing up to supply grocery stores with edible flowers similar to their potted herbs that are fixtures in produce sections.

The greenhouse grower recently enlisted the help of the Vineland Research and Innovation Centre, for which I've done writing work, to determine the power of edible flowers with consumers.

Freeman tested 25 types of edible flowers for ease of production before handing over their 10 best to Vineland for profiling by the research station's trained sensory panel. They were also sampled by more 200 consumers in the GTA.

More than half the taste testers preferred strong aromas and spicy tastes, like those offered by nasturtiums and candy pop mint. Forty-four per cent tended toward edible flowers simply for their texture, favouring dianthus and impatiens, which have little to no flavour.

In both groups, though, edible flowers appealed mostly for their appearance, explained Vineland consumer insights research scientist Alexandra Grygorczyk. That could be why most people involved with the study indicated they'd use them for special occasions.

"When people are having dinner parties and want to cook something extra special, this will give it a bit of a wow factor," Grygorczyk said. "If they have flavour, it's like a fringe benefit."

Meanwhile, Whitehead is testing other varieties, including fuchsia, to expand her repertoire, selling them directly from her farm or at her booth at the Waterdown Farmers Market. She doesn't foresee the current hunger for pretty being sated anytime soon.

"I think it will be a trend for a while," Whitehead said. "Especially here, where people say, 'Oh, you've got edible flowers. I can't find them.'"

Tiffany Mayer is the author of *Niagara Food: A Flavourful History of the Peninsula's Bounty*. She blogs about food and farming at timeforgrub.com.
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