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In more homes, flowers are moving from the table centerpiece to the dinner plate

By Seunghee Suh | Columbia News Service

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In Teresa O'Connor's flower garden in Boise, Idaho, one can find a variety of brilliant flowers, including aromatic English lavenders, bright pink apothecary roses and a sunburst of calendulas. These flowers will be great additions to the dinner table -- not as centerpieces, but as dinner.

Fried, sauteed or baked inside a cake, edible flowers are moving from the center of the table to the middle of the plate as more people use these colorful treats as cooking ingredients. They come in a variety of flavors, from sweet dandelions to citrusy marigolds; many are easy to grow.

"The whole idea that you can eat flowers just like vegetables and fruits is appealing," says O'Connor, co-author of "Grocery Gardening" (Cool Springs Press, 2010) and creator of the blog www.seasonalwisdom.com (<http://www.seasonalwisdom.com>).



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Apothecary Rose and English Lavender grow in Teresa O'Connor's cottage-style garden in Boise, Idaho. (Teresa O'Connor)

Not all flowers are edible, however, and diners should consume only those that have been grown with the intention of being eaten, experts caution.

Edible flowers come in different flavors. Nasturtiums have a peppery taste and are mostly tossed in salads and on top of pizzas. Roses have a sweet, floral taste; they can be candied, made into jellies or strained to bake inside cookies, cakes and sweet breads. Calendulas, often known as "the poor man's saffron," can be chopped and added to soups and stews.

Part of edible flowers' appeal is their convenience. Nasturtiums, calendulas and borages are inexpensive and can be easily grown in backyards, O'Connor says. Once seeded, the flowers tolerate most soil types and can bloom again the following year.

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"Many



vegetables and fruits are not worth the trials to grow at home, but edible flowers are easy," says Amy Suardi, a mother of four from Washington, D.C., who blogs on the website www.frugal-mama.com (<http://www.frugal-mama.com>). "Animals and bugs don't seem to be interested in (most of) them."

Suardi and her children started growing their edible garden with nasturtiums and borages last year. The kids were delighted by the idea of eating flowers after they found a robust vine with pumpkin flowers growing from the seeds they planted around Halloween. They became addicted to fried pumpkin flowers, but have experimented with putting flowers in risottos, on top of pastas and in salads.

As edible flowers gain more followers, local farms are seeing a rise in seed sales. Kitazawa Seed Co. in Oakland recently added an edible flower seed mixture to its inventory because of customer demand, says Maya Shiroyama, co-owner of the company.

"More gardeners are discovering how beauty and food can go together," says Tom Stearns, the president of High Mowing Organic Seeds in Wolcott, Vt., which produces and sells flower seeds such as calendula and German chamomile.

Younger people, in particular, are interested in growing their own produce, having been raised in a generation that cares about organic food, says Maree Gaetani, who works in community relations at Gardener's Supply Company in Burlington, Vt. "Younger people are interested in cocktail gardening, growing flowers like peonies and hibiscus to mix in spirits and other drinks," she adds.

Kacie Saulters, a medical resident at the University of Virginia, was introduced to edible flowers in July after finding a package of squash blossoms in her "bounty basket," a container of hand-picked fresh produce from local farms. "It's not every day that I eat flowers, so I had no idea what to do with them" she recalls.

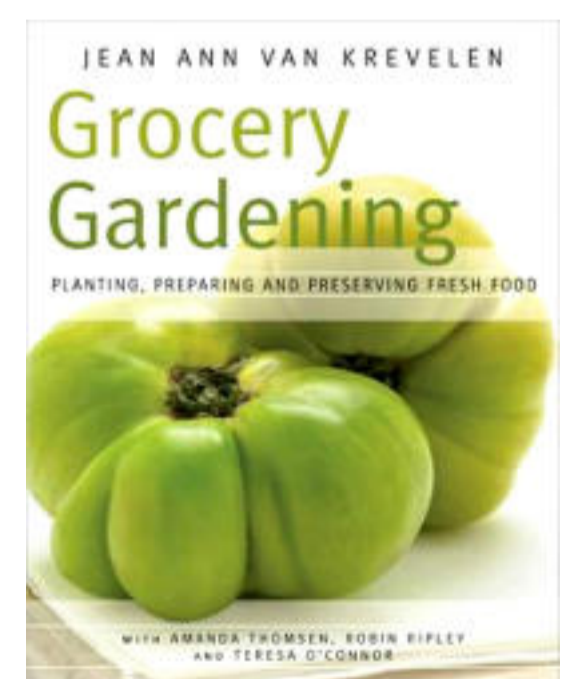
After a bit of online research, Saulters, a native of Alabama, fried the flowers after stuffing them with ricotta cheese and served them to her friends. They found the squash blossoms to be a great appetizer.

Chefs also have incorporated flowers into haute cuisine. Chef Alice Waters of Chez Panisse in Berkeley has created various dishes using nasturtiums, including garden squash and nasturtium butter pasta. Yannick Alléno, the chef who helped Le 1947 in Courchevel, France, earn three Michelin stars, incorporates flowers such as borage in his creations.

But even edible flowers must be chosen for the kitchen with caution, O'Connor says. Some may have been sprayed with toxic pesticides.

Rosalind Creasy, of Los Altos, the author of "The Edible Flower Garden," started what she calls "her religion" with edible flowers in the '80s when her husband got an allergic reaction from eating a salad with primroses. "All of the books said primroses are edible, but they didn't say the Latin name," she says. "The edible kinds were not grown in the U.S., and I said, 'OK, this is not something we should be playing with.' "

People should never consume flowers from florists, Creasy warns, since they've usually been sprayed with pesticides.



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Cover of "Grocery Gardening," by Jean Ann Van Krevelen and others. (Cool Springs Press)