

Summertime herbs and edible flowers



Angelica

The leaves of ornamental angelica pachycarp make a wonderful garnish as the shiny dark leaves stay fresh for a while. Another type of angelica, angelica archangelica, is the culinary and medicinal plant. It has matt green leaves which wilt quickly. The stems are used to crystallise for garnish on cakes and desserts, and the root is used for medicinal purposes.



Borage

Borage tastes refreshing and cooling with a slightly bitter, cucumber flavour. The light purple flowers are most commonly used and look great as a garnish on salads or desserts. The leaves are not really that palatable as they are 'hairy' or slightly 'prickly', if you do use them for their taste select the small young leaves, they can be raw in salads or lightly cooked with other green vegetables. The flowers can be set in ice cubes or crystallised, both of which look very impressive.



Chervil

Chervil is a mild herb and a generous quantity of chopped leaves is best added fresh just before serving as the light flavour is quickly lost. It can be put in all sorts of salads, or sprinkled over lightly-cooked vegetables or soups. Chervil is much like parsley but is more subtle, it goes well with egg dishes, meats, poultry and fish.



Cornflowers

The petals of cornflowers can be plucked and added to salads for a colourful salad. Blue cornflowers are more likely to be found though the pink and whites are also edible.



Dill

Dill leaves and seeds have a mild aniseed flavour which is similar though slightly sweeter and more aromatic than fennel. Small quantities of freshly chopped dill taste great in fish dishes and pickles, with steamed vegetables, salads, soups, egg dishes and sauces. If fresh dill is not available, fennel can be used as a substitute.



Fennel

Fennel grows wild by the roadside and may even be in your garden! It looks a bit like dill and tastes much the same. Small quantities of the leaves can be chopped up finely and put in salads or sprinkled over steamed vegetables. Fennel goes well with fish, soups, egg dishes and sauces. The seeds are used too, and have a stronger flavour. Bronze fennel has distinctive dark feathery leaves and makes a particularly stunning garnish. It tastes similar to green fennel. Fennel bulb is also available, it can be sliced finely and added to stir fries or salads. It also may be baked.



Lemon balm

Lemon balm leaves give a delicate lemon sweet flavour to vegetable and fruit salads, punches, soups, sauces and stuffings. It can be used in place of grated lemon rind.



Marigold

Marigold flowers, very similar to calendula, make an attractive edible garnish for all sorts of dishes. They can also be added sparingly to salads. The petals can be used in place of saffron and will give colour in many dishes, especially rice and egg dishes.



Nasturtium

The leaves and flowers can be eaten in salads. Choose young leaves which have a refreshing peppery taste not unlike watercress. Nasturtium seeds when pickled are used as a substitute for capers. Nasturtium is generally not grown commercially in New Zealand as the flowers are so delicate that they damage very easily.



Pansy

Hearts Ease pansy is an attractive edible flower which is used for garnish. It is available commercially in limited quantities.



Oregano

Oregano tastes really good with omelettes, stuffings, pizzas, salad dressings, mayonnaise, pasta, sausage, rice dishes and most vegetable dishes, particularly tomatoes, egg plant, courgettes and potatoes. It can be used to flavour vinegars. There are many varieties which have been developed from a parent plant, oregano or wild marjoram. In New Zealand we tend to use the names oregano, marjoram or sweet marjoram interchangeably and although they are different varieties they are very similar. Oregano is much more widely available.



Sage

Sage is a strong-flavoured herb which is generally used in small quantities. It is quite a versatile herb which lends itself well to a range of dishes including rich meats, stuffings, onions, soups, sauces, dressings, pates, quiches, pulses, cheese dishes, breads and casseroles. There are several varieties of sage, some of which do not have the green leaves of standard sage. Pineapple sage is available commercially and is generally sweeter and more mellow. Try threading whole leaves onto skewers with cubes of meat and vegetables.



Salad burnet

Salad burnet has a very delicate and pleasant flavour. It is sometimes described as being like a cucumber with a slightly almond taste. It should always be used raw as it tastes bitter when cooked. As the name suggests salad burnet is great in salads, use only the very young leaves and discard the stems. It is also a very attractive garnish.



Savory

There are two types of savory, summer savory and winter savory. Both are available commercially in limited quantities. Both taste a bit like thyme but are hotter and peppery. They can be used raw or cooked, whenever you want a warm-hot flavour. Summer savory has a more delicate flavour than winter savory. Savory can be added to stuffing, sausages, cheese dishes, steamed vegetables and salads.



Tarragon

French tarragon is the most commonly found variety. Raw or cooked tarragon goes well with most vegetable dishes, especially those with a delicate flavour. It is used with chicken, fish, mild meat and egg dishes, in salads, sauces, dressings and makes a lovely flavoured vinegar. Tarragon is a key ingredient of bearnaise sauce.



Verbena

Lemon verbena is available commercially and can be used raw to impart a subtle lemon flavour to salads or drinks. Verbena flowers are great garnishes and are available in white and a range of pinks / reds.