



It's all edimental my friend

A perennial plant with fabulous flowers or foliage, that tastes as good as it looks? Some might say it's a horticultural Holy Grail. Your borders are probably already bursting with these delicious bobby-dazzlers – and it's high time you tucked in, says Stephen Barstow

I'll never forget my first taste of a hosta. Tentatively nibbling a tender early-spring shoot, I'd expected some bitterness but instead the taste was mild with a slight sweetness, the texture almost crispy. I could hardly believe I'd reached middle age before sampling its exquisite flavour. How many hostas had I seen, how many had I grown, without realising that they were edible? And not just edible – absolutely delicious!

The deeper I dived into researching the potential of this popular perennial as a vegetable, the more surprised I was. I read that hostas had long been a wild food in Japan, and that they were now cultivated for culinary use. I came across Ernie Flippo of the American Hosta Society and his recipes for cream of hosta soup and an appetising hosta pie. Hosta sushi came next, and then I tried the blanched young shoots with a dipping sauce of roasted sesame oil and soy sauce. I cooked these dishes. I devoured these dishes. I became a devotee.

Little did I know, this was actually the first step on a now decades-long gastronomic journey exploring well-known and well-loved but scandalously under-eaten plants. In my 40-plus years of exploration, I've trialled some 9,000 different edible perennials, and today the borders in my garden here in Trondheim, Norway, are bursting with more than 1,500 of my favourites.

You'll already know many of them well: hostas, dahlias, bellflowers, begonias, saxifrages, gunneras, bistorts, Solomon's seals, lilies and mallows. All our gardens are packed with so-called ornamentals whose taste is every bit as spectacular as their appearance, and every bit as flavourful as our traditional food crops. What's more, in my experience, they're also proving more climate-resilient and robust than standard veg crops. They require less water, are significantly more drought- and shade-tolerant than the usual food fodder; are often spring-harvested, making them less vulnerable to pests and diseases; and they are packed full of vitamins and minerals.

So why aren't we eating them?

A salad of Stephen's garden pickings, made up using 77 different plants, each with a distinct flavour to discover

STEPHEN BARSTOW

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What's in a name?

Thankfully, the dining tables are beginning to turn. Increasingly, from gardens at RHS Chelsea Flower Show, through to a host of social media channels, one word can be seen cropping up again and again: edimentals. It's a term I'm particularly fond of – but then I would say that, because I came up with it. I coined the word edimental – as in edible ornamental – back in 2008, while researching for my book *Around the World in 80 Plants*, which describes my top 80 perennial vegetables, traces their roots and outlines culinary applications. I define an edimental perennial as any that's typically been prized for its decorative qualities but that's also edible, or has some edible parts.

This isn't to be confused with the more common idea of growing traditional vegetable crops among ornamentals – squeezing in some rainbow chard or a pretty cabbage here and there. No – edimentals are an almost unfathomably broad category of plants and, to my mind, are the most useful of all as they can feed us as well as beautify our borders.

I'm glad to report that edimentals are having a moment right now. Beyond my own home plot, and the public gardens I've created in the city of Trondheim and its Ringve Botanical Garden, there are elements of edimental gardening integrated into various forest gardens across Britain and beyond. Take, for example, the World Food Garden at RHS Garden Wisley, the Kitchen Garden at RHS Garden Bridgewater, and the Edible Wood in the gardens at York Museum. During the past couple of years I've even seen edimental gardens presented on Main Avenue at RHS Chelsea, such as the memorable Centre for Mental Health's The Balance Garden, created by Wild City Studio in 2023. Last year's show was a veritable feast: the planting in the Planet Good Earth garden was almost all edible; a good-for-your-guts edible wildflower meadow featured in the Bowel Research UK Microbiome Garden; and the Pulp Friction – Growing Skills Garden showed us a carpet of edibles beneath a beautiful birch copse.

Could your garden be next? Because, rest assured, this is a tried-and-tested way of growing your own. I wasn't the one to discover the culinary qualities of hostas, dahlias or daylilies – every single edimental plant I've ever trialled, ever tasted, has a long history of being eaten, somewhere on the planet. When I sampled daylily flower buds, I followed a 2,000-year

tradition of doing so in China; the productive and hardy *Allium cernuum* (Chicago onion) I ate were popular with cooks and pollinators alike across the First Nations of North America, as were *Canna edulis*, yacon, dahlia tubers and dozens – no, hundreds – more.

It's simply that when European plant hunters of the past few centuries plundered the planet's botanical bounties and brought them home, they often neglected to transport with them any information – culinary or otherwise – for how they might be used. One example is the tomato – initially introduced from South America to Europe as an ornamental plant. I hope to share this knowledge with gardeners who may not realise the treasure trove of ingredients already growing in their soil. My garden is packed with plants whose taste is as spectacular as their looks; there are a feast of flavours to explore.



Matteuccia struthiopteris
AGM (ostrich fern)

Flavour of the month

My own edimental garden was described by garden writer Alys Fowler as a “psychedelic wildflower meadow” with an air of “dishevelled grace”. But it wasn't always

this way. My roots were in Hampshire and I spent a brief period as a student in Edinburgh, where I tended a small organic veg plot. In 1981 I moved with my wife to Norway – attracted to my now-home's incredible views across the Trondheim Fjord and the bird boxes strung up around the ½-acre garden.

The challenge of establishing a garden in this part of the world, at a latitude 63.4° north, was substantial. In the early years I had some success growing annual veg on a rotation, traditionally, but to get the greatest harvests, I realised I'd have to look beyond the staples I'd learned to grow on my Scottish plot.

And so it was that, long before I tasted my first hosta, I planted my first edimental. After reading about *Crambe maritima* (sea kale) in John Seymour's



The mild, sweet-tasting leaves, flowers and flower buds of *Malva alcea* (greater musk mallow) can be eaten raw or cooked. They instantly cheer a salad or stir-fry, and are wonderful scattered on pizza



Stephen harvests tall stems from *Aralia cordata*, which has thrived in his garden in Norway with regular cropping, for more than 20 years; *Campanula latifolia* is next on his pick-list

“My garden is packed with plants whose taste is as spectacular as their looks”



When dahlias first came to European shores in the 1800s they were promoted as a food plant, but the potato won out



TRY THIS

Hosta stems with a sesame soya dip

This is a favourite way to eat hostas in Japan so, if you're tempted to try it, it's a great way to start your edimental journey. It's best to force your hostas to get the most tender shoots – simply cover the plant with an upturned bucket before the shoots start to emerge. But don't worry if you've missed that window, they'll still taste good. Cut the shoots when they're long enough, but before the leaves begin to unfurl; rinse in cold water and pat dry with kitchen towel. Eat them raw with a simple dip of toasted sesame oil, soy sauce and ground black pepper mixed together.



Many plants in The School Food Matters Garden at RHS Chelsea 2023, designed by Harry Holding, were in some way edible. *Hesperis matronalis* is a member of the brassica family – its young shoots, flowers and buds eaten raw or cooked; *Asphodeline lutea* boasts one of the best-tasting edible flowers – good boiled and seasoned with oil, lemon, salt and pepper; and the flowers of *Lunaria rediviva* AGM, tasty in summer salads, are available for a long season

PHOTOGRAPHY: GAP, RHS, SHUTTERSTOCK

The Self-Sufficient Gardener, I bought root-cuttings through an advert in *The Garden*, and planted them at the end of one of my raised beds. I became fascinated by the stories surrounding this plant – the favourite veg of American Founding Father Thomas Jefferson, it was so popular that populations declined in some areas due to overcollecting.

Fast-forward 40 years and my modest garden now keeps my household self-sufficient in fruit, veg and edimentals all year-round, including produce from the same sea kale plants, just as productive now as they ever were. It's been a journey. In my quest to re-evaluate the edible potential of perennial ornamental plants, I've ploughed through RHS seed lists, traded seeds with generous gardeners, and scoured the pages of tomes such as *Cornucopia II: A Sourcebook of Edible Plants*, which became like a bible to me. Some of the experiments tasted divine, others disappointingly bitter – but that's part of the joy, keeping what you enjoy, so your garden grows into a smorgasbord of the flavours you most love.

Today, a jaunt around my borders can provide everything I need to make a mouth-watering pakora – the young growth of *Allium victorialis* (victory onion), sorrel, daylily shoots, *Aralia elata* (devil's walking stick), *Angelica gigas* (purple angelica), variegated ground elder, *Campanula latifolia* (giant bellflower), *Myrrhis odorata* (sweet cicely) and dandelion leaves. Instead of cumin spice, you can use the ground seed of the UK native hogweed *Heracleum sphondylium*, which should be a staple in every garden as it feeds pollinators as well as humans for months on end. Another day, our dinner might be delicious spiced-up greens of Korean *Ligularia fischeri*, or perhaps the tasty young growth of *Rudbeckia laciniata* (cut-leaved coneflower, or Cherokee spinach). This garden centre staple in Britain is actually grown commercially as a leafy vegetable in Korea.

Just compare this gastronomic diversity to your average allotment, not to mention your local supermarket aisles. There's no judgement from me – who isn't partial to a potato? However, edimentals offer a world of new flavours, and a wealth of opportunity in any garden.

Such diversity indeed, that in 2003 I became known as the Extreme Salad Man, after creating a world record-breaking salad made from 537 different home-grown plants, many of which were edimentals. Since then, I've made a 230-allium pesto, a 412-plant ferment, a 115-flower salad, and a winter salad with 140 home-grown ingredients – the latter all harvested with snow still on the ground. These spectacular dishes do more than make headlines – they remind us that diverse, seasonal, leafy perennial vegetables are an important component of a healthy diet. And goodness knows we all should do better on that score.

Food for thought

I hope you'll now view ornamental borders through an edimental lens, as I do. On a stroll around RHS Wisley last summer, I couldn't help but feel hungry. There were dahlias galore – whose edible petals can be used as a beautiful garnish, while the tubers can be eaten both raw and cooked. These have a slightly sweet taste, likened to celery, carrot, beetroot,

water chestnut, sweet potato and Jerusalem artichoke – and are best served, as in Mexico, with a chilli salsa.

Elsewhere, *Malva moschata* (musk mallow) and many other members of the *Malvaceae* family provide greens and flowers over a long season. *Bistorta officinalis* is an important arctic survival food, and the sweet shoots of many of the *Polygonatum* species (Solomon's seal) are savoured worldwide. *Lilium davidii*,

L. lancifolium, *L. martagon* AGM and *L. hansonii* are all lily species grown and wild-harvested for their delicious bulbs, which are sold on Asian markets across the globe. Another of my favourites is blanched *Levisticum officinale* (lovage), which I refer to as spring celery – it remains undamaged by slugs, unlike my true celery.

And then there are the hostas. In Japan, the large-leaved hostas are most commonly used as food, notably *Hosta montana* (named *oba giboshi* in Japan) and *Hosta sieboldiana* (*to giboshi*). There, you can buy blanched hosta shoots, or *urui*, in the supermarket year-round, such is the demand. All *Hosta* species and cultivars are edible, and all that I've tried had a similar taste. As long as you're sure the shoots you are harvesting are from the genus *Hosta*, it's safe to try any – just be mindful that in Japan they're sometimes confused with the poisonous *Veratrum*.

How about edimental trees and shrubs? Oh yes, it is possible, as I have done at home, to create an entirely edible forest garden, too. Favourites include *Aralia elata* 'Aureovariegata' AGM, the young leaves of which are delicious in tempura; *Toona sinensis* 'Flamingo' for



Dandelion leaves

“Let your garden grow into a smorgasbord of flavours you love”

its tender young foliage that's a popular cooked veg in the Far East; *Magnolia kobus* (and some other species) for distinctively-flavoured flowers and flower buds, best boiled; and the fine spring shoots and buds of *Staphylea* (bladdernuts), which are large shrubs or small trees that have pretty white or pink spring blossom.

Eats, shoots & leaves

You needn't worry that you're sacrificing aesthetics when harvesting an edimental garden. I've been known to harvest every shoot on a hosta plant, just before the leaves unfold in spring – they quickly resprout and still flower in the same season. There are many more perennials – including numerous, but not all, alliums – that can be cut back to encourage a new flush of foliage and later flowering. This is, after all, common practice with chives (*Allium schoenoprasum*). In the case of daylilies, harvesting the buds or flowers will generally stimulate the plant to produce more flower shoots.

You really can squeeze these plants in anywhere, too. It's a wonderful quirk about edimentals that many can be grown in the shade, including *Matteuccia struthiopteris* AGM (ostrich fern fiddleheads, for the young, coiled fronds), *Ornithogalum pyrenaicum* (Bath asparagus, for flower shoots), *Erythronium 'Pagoda'* AGM and *Campanula latifolia* (giant bellflower, for the young growth). And if yours is an already-full balcony garden, there are edimental houseplants, too. Try the flowers of numerous begonia species, which have a wonderfully zingy, sour taste.

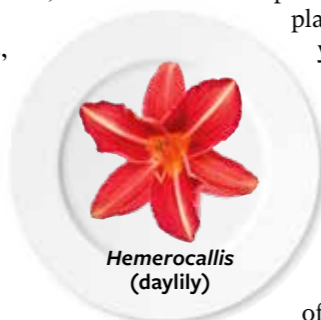
On my travels, spreading the word about edimentals, my audiences have been as diverse as the plants – from people in local transition and permaculture groups to forest gardeners, foragers, festival-goers, gardening clubs and Plant Heritage groups. I've spoken to growers at botanical gardens, market gardens, RHS Gardens and RHS Partner Gardens, plus associations of gourmet

chefs, and gardeners and chefs at the Royal Norwegian Court. I was even invited by the then Prince of Wales, now King Charles III, to see his Plant Heritage National Plant Collection of large- and giant-leaved *Hosta* at Highgrove, after I'd jokingly mentioned at a talk that with this abundance of hostas, the Prince had the most productive edimental garden in the land.

If that illustrious company tempts you to begin your own voyage through the under-explored flavours of your plants, just make sure you've identified correctly the plants you are about to eat. And always research which parts of the plant are edible and how to prepare them. But don't let that put you off. We already cut flowers to bring them inside for floral arrangements; why not delight our palates with perennial edimental flowers too? Once you embark on your edimental voyage, you'll never look at supposedly ornamental plants in the same way again, but instead you'll gaze upon your borders with hungry eyes.

You're probably already growing a garden that's good enough to eat – it's time to tuck in. ◉

Stephen Barstow is a perennial vegetable grower and researcher. His book, *Around the World in 80 Plants* was published in 2014. For more of his work, see: edimentals.com



Hemerocallis
(daylily)



At first glance, the Bowel Research UK Microbiome Garden at RHS Chelsea 2024 looked like an average, albeit lovely, wildflower meadow, but nearly all the plants were edible. Spring shoots of *Bistorta officinalis* are the main ingredient in a traditional West Yorkshire dish called dock pudding; while boiled or fried *Anchusa azurea* shoots have long been part of the Mediterranean diet – its blue flowers make a sweet snack with apple-like flavour

DISCLAIMER

Know what you're nibbling

Make absolutely sure you have correctly identified a plant before you eat it, and that it is safe to consume. Never assume if one plant in a genus is edible that they all are; nor that all parts of the plant are edible if one part is. Be aware too, that proper preparation is sometimes needed – just as with shop-bought veg, not all edible perennials can be consumed raw. Before consuming any new food, sample a small amount first and if you are pregnant or have health concerns, consult your doctor first.

Stephen's essential edimentals



Hosta (hostas)

In Japan the popular commercial product is blanched spring shoots, but green shoots can also be used as you would spinach. All hostas are safe to eat.



Allium cernuum (Chicago onions)

My favourite edimental allium – it's tasty, productive and fast-growing, with beautiful edible flowers, and it stays green all winter.



Hablitzia tamnoides (Caucasian spinach)

It can be harvested early in spring, is nutritious, mild-tasting, productive, shade-loving and long-lived. Eat raw or use as you would spinach.



Hemerocallis (daylilies)

I grow different species of yellow daylilies for a steady supply of the delicious flower buds from May–September, best used in stir-fries.



Aralia cordata (udo)

This herbaceous perennial towers above my head, and its half-metre-long shoots are tasty peeled and blanched. Smaller cultivar 'Sun King' is more fibrous.



Rudbeckia laciniata (cutleaf coneflowers)

I adore the aromatic taste of members of the Asteraceae – such as this, *Aster scaber* and *Ligularia fischeri* – in stir-fries and tempura.



Crambe maritima (sea kale)

My first true edimental love, it was once known as the king of vegetables. The flowers and blanched leaves are delicious.



Allium stipitatum (Persian shallots)

This easily cultivated ornamental onion is farmed and wild-collected in Iran, where the sliced dried bulbs are served with a yogurt dip.