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Food & Home

Cooking with Edible Plants, from Root to Flower

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Photo courtesy of Laurie Stern

For thousands of years, we've been [eating our flowers](#). The ancient Romans used roses to flavor drinks, treats, and even omelets; during the Middle Ages, the French added calendula to their salads; and in the 17th century, violets were lauded for their sweetness and color.

As the founder of an edible flower brand and bakery, aptly named Eat Your Flowers, [Loria Stern](#) draws inspiration from the past to make modern flora-infused creations: [New-yog shortbread cookies](#) topped with marigolds and chamomile. Brioche buns swirled with scarlet rose petals, sky-blue Key lime pies garnished with delicate pressed bouquets.

And with a new cookbook, also titled Eat Your Flowers (available April 25), the California native is making it easier for home cooks to bring flowers and other botanicals into their own kitchens. Far more than just insta-bait, her recipes will inspire cooks to look at plants in new ways and enjoy the unique flavors and textures they have to offer. In celebration of her upcoming release, she shared with us a few ways to make the most of nature's bounty—plus three showstopping botanical-based recipes.



Eat Your Flowers: A Cookbook
Bookshop, \$41.85

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GETTING TO KNOW YOUR PLANTS

Stern takes a holistic approach when cooking with plants and suggests that a basic understanding of what's growing in your garden or sitting at your local farmers' market can inform how you use these ingredients. "My definition of botanicals is really just the entire plant," she says. Her cookbook outlines the six basic parts of most plants, along with applications for each.

• **Seeds:** Stern writes that seeds are vital for home cooks, given that they're the source of many spices and pantry staples. They can enhance the flavor and texture of a dish (coffee, black pepper, cocoa) and provide sustenance (wheat, rice, beans). Mustard—a key ingredient in the salmon recipe below—also falls into the edible-seed category.

• **Roots:** While some edible roots may feel less-than-exciting staples in our produce drawers, Stern loves ingredients like carrots, radishes, and beets for their color- and flavor-imparting properties (for vivid evidence, see her recipe for [Aura Soup](#) below). Many can pack a real nutritional punch, too: "There are so many incredible roots out there, like turmeric and ginger," Stern says.

• **Stems:** Many edible stems are underappreciated yet highly versatile (broccoli stems, for instance, can be stir-fried, roasted, or blended into a soup—though you may want to peel the woody outer skin before using). Stern writes that asparagus, bamboo, celery, and rhubarb are all stems you can eat—as are certain forms of tree bark, like cinnamon, which is harvested from the inner bark of [cinnamon trees](#).

• **Leaves:** Of course, we're accustomed to eating leaves in the form of lettuce, kale, spinach, and other nutrient-dense greens, but herbs also qualify and can offer both freshness and flavor (see the sprigs of dill, used as a tasty garnish, in the salmon recipe). Leaves can also add color to an otherwise lackluster dish, Stern says in her book.

• **Flowers:** "I just find it so interesting how each different variety of a flower looks different, has a different color, has a different structure and makeup, but ultimately is the female reproduction part of the plant," Stern says. A few edible flowers she's found in her own kitchen: cauliflower, jasmine, sunflowers, saffron, tulips. A quick scroll through Stern's [Instagram](#) will yield endless inspiration for possible uses—or try the lemonade recipe below to see how florals can be steeped for an eye-catching burst of color.

• **Fruits:** Yes, we're talking about what might normally come to mind in the context of fruit (berries, oranges, apples), but from a botanical perspective, fruit also refers to ingredients like cucumbers, tomatoes, pumpkins, and eggplant—all of which are the [matured, ripened ovaries of fertilized flowers](#). Stern says the fruit is one of the most important parts of the plant, as it's where we get a large portion of our food from.

A RAINBOW-PACKED MENU



Aura Soup

Stern developed this infinitely adaptable recipe while cooking for a family with a variety of fluctuating dietary needs. She found herself replacing the beets with other veggies depending on the week. "I just found it so cool that the soup was always a different color and always tasted delicious," she says. Embrace ROYGBIV and swap in purple cabbage, spinach, or carrots. You can also try the perennial butterfly pea flower for a vibrant sky-blue variation.

Dill Salmon with Creamy Apple Mustard

While relatively simple to make, this dish will require some advance planning (the mustard seed garnish takes about three days to ferment). "The little mustard seeds—those are just so good and so special," Stern says. "They literally have the texture of caviar." Stewed apples and mustard form the base, which delicately balances between sweet and savory—a great dairy-free version of a creamy sauce.

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Hibiscus Lavender Lemonade

During the summertime, Stern always keeps a batch of this refreshing drink in the fridge, ready to serve to friends. The dried hibiscus flowers impart a pleasant tartness, and the sweetness can be adjusted by increasing or decreasing the amount of the lavender-infused syrup. "I just find it to be such a pretty color, and everyone is obsessed with it when they try it," she says.

[GET RECIPE](#)

USING BOTANICALS IN THE KITCHEN

If you're open to doing a little research, incorporating botanicals may be easier than you think. Remember that not every plant is meant to be eaten, Stern writes, and even plants that are typically edible may have been sprayed with pesticides, so use good judgment, research which plants (and which parts of any given plant) are fit for consumption, and wash gently but thoroughly. (In her book, she offers a handy list of edible botanicals, as well as their flavor profiles and some suggested uses.)

Although you may find edible flowers at your local Whole Foods, Stern loves sourcing them from growers in the community. Many farmers grow edible flowers to help attract the pollinators that will ultimately contribute to better produce, even if they're not on display at the farmers' market. "You can ask them and start up a conversation, like, 'Do you have edible flowers on your farm? If you do, could I buy some next week?'" she says. "And oftentimes they'll be so excited to sell you the edible flowers they grow."

Stern also stresses the importance of experimentation. The cookies that ultimately launched Stern's career came about after a client requested floral desserts for a Georgia O'Keeffe-themed bridal shower. Around that time, Stern was enrolled in a class on edible and medicinal plants and decided to use some calendula and nasturtiums she'd found. "When I baked my first batch, I noticed that certain botanicals [were] brighter and more vibrant after baking them, while others turned grey or brown and really shriveled up." Not every botanical will react in the way you expect, but that can be a good thing.

You may even choose to grow your own botanicals. Stern's garden in Los Angeles currently supplies about 75 percent of the pressed flowers she now sells, though she encourages newcomers to start small and adapt to personal circumstances. "If you live somewhere where you don't really have access to growing edible flowers or it's not part of your schedule, you could start with herbs that you can buy at the grocery store, like parsley or cilantro, rosemary, thyme—herbs that are most commonplace," she says, adding that they can be a great option for those living in, say, a cozy New York City apartment. Depending on the herb, you could even allow it to flower and use several parts of the plant—perhaps press it into a dough or place it on top of a biscuit.

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