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The Market for Edible Flowers in Atlanta, GA: A Case Study

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Flowers have traditionally been used in many types of cooking: European, Asian, East Indian, Victorian English, and Middle Eastern. Today, there is a renewed interest in edible flowers, especially as culinary delights in U.S. upscale restaurants, for their taste, color, and fragrance. With this information as a background, undergraduate students in Food & Fiber Marketing and Selling in Agribusiness at the University of Georgia tackled an assignment of a demand analysis for edible flowers for the five-star restaurants in the Atlanta metro area. A chef/food buyer survey and a consumer survey were developed by the students, and completed via on-site interviews with either the restaurant chefs or the food buyers of the restaurants and customers departing these restaurants. The demand analysis of the chefs/buyers focused on the specific flowers in demand by the restaurant trade, the quantity of each demanded, and whether the price paid to growers adequately compensated them for the intense marketing, specialized management skills, special production technologies, and limited scale of production required of the growers. (As small-volume flower growers seek plants, niches, and alternatives to sustain their operations economically, one of the production and marketing activities that surfaced was edible flowers.) The consumer survey used closed-ended Likert scale, importance scale, rating scale, and intention-to-buy scale questions.

The students learned from faculty in the departments of food science and horticulture that edible flowers have many potential uses. Edible flowers can be used fresh as a garnish or as an integral part of a dish, such as a salad. Some flowers can be fried in a light batter, or be stuffed, or used in stir-fry dishes. Edible flowers can be candied; frozen in ice cubes and added to beverages; made into jellies and jams; used to make teas or wines; minced and added to spreads or butters; or even used to make vinegars for cooking, marinades, or dressings for salads.

The results of the 62 chef/buyer surveys were not as encouraging. The responses from the chefs/buyers highlighted several fallacies, cautions, and concerns about serving edible flowers, except as an occasional herbal garnish. For instance, not all flowers are edible; some may taste bad and several are poisonous. A flower is not necessarily edible just because it is served with food; the flowers of most culinary herbs are safe to use. Flowers available from commercial florists, found growing along roadsides, or from commercial floriculture/greenhouse operations typically contain residues from pesticides ruled unacceptable for food production; however, organic growers cannot produce the rich soil nutrients required to produce the edible flowers high in vitamins, minerals, nectar, and pollen, although flowers are nearly calorie-free. Individuals who are susceptible to hay fever, asthma, or allergies should not eat flowers, since many food-borne allergies are due to sensitivity to pollen; product-liability, food-safety, and consumer-health concerns mandate precautions. There is inconsistency in tastes, even among the same species year-to-year, due to different soil types, fertilization, sunlight/heat/humidity combinations, watering procedures, other environmental conditions, and time of harvesting. Preparation requires attention to detail—pistils, stamens, and small leaves must be removed with tweezers because pollen can distract from the flavor; the sepals of nearly all edible flowers must also be removed; and for some edible flowers only the flower petals are edible, yet the white base of the petal of many flowers have a bitter taste and should also be removed. Edible flowers are extremely fragile and cannot be conserved in the refrigerator, so they must be consumed as quickly as possible; this requires daily deliveries by growers of very small quantities (grams or count, not ounces or pounds). Value-added edible flowers can create excitement for the consumer and generate added income for a few floriculture producers.

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