



# A Guide to Garden Grazing

## Nutritious Nibbling in Nature

A 4-H Youth Gardening Fact Sheet



**Grazing in the garden** offers youth opportunities to connect with plants through casual nibbling. Edible ornamental and wild plants can introduce youth to new cultures, offer lessons on plant biology and identification, and inspire enthusiasm for gardening. Garden grazing also encourages a deeper understanding of nutrition and healthy eating habits. All of the plants in this grazing guide are easy to grow in a garden, and some can be found by taking a stroll outside.

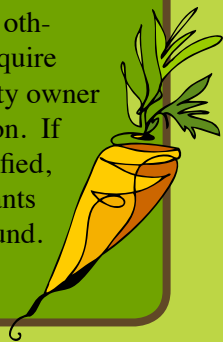
Before you begin to use this guide, make sure that you read the safety rules presented below under “Grazing Governance.” Also make sure to respect property rights and rules. Be sure you have the property owner’s permission to collect first, even if you are in a public park or other natural area. Collecting of any kind is often prohibited in public places; pay attention to signs, and obey instructions. Remind your group that getting permission and respecting property is an important first step. Be conservative when you graze, especially in wild areas. Take only what you can use, and leave the rest for other grazers, including wildlife.



Start a garden program with youth, teaching them how to grow vegetables, edible flowers and herbs.

### **Grazing on Private Property:**

The owner of a private property may be concerned with visitors on their land due to potential liability for injury or property loss and damage. They might be concerned about the plant populations or setting a precedent for others to use their land. Inquire directly with the property owner and respect their decision. If owners cannot be identified, graze elsewhere, the plants listed are commonly found.



### **Grazing Governance**

**Follow these guidelines to ensure safe and appropriate grazing:**

- Eat only what you know is safe! Positively identify all plants (and plant parts) before you nibble. Use an illustrated field guide to identify any wild plants and a garden manual to identify ornamental plants.
- Taste only in small quantities, particularly as you get started.
- If you have severe asthma or hay fever, avoid edible flowers, particularly those with large amounts of pollen.
- Not every part of the plant is edible, be sure to eat the recommended part.
- When you take youth on a grazing expedition, do not allow them to graze indiscriminately. Make sure they show you the plant for positive identification before eating any part of it.

- Know the areawhere you are collecting. Whether you collect on your own property or someone else’s, make certain that you know if and when any pesticides have been used to kill weeds, insects, or diseases. Find out about any pesticides that have been used to determine when it is safe to collect plants for food. It is impossible to tell just by looking at a plant whether it has been sprayed. Also make sure that plants are not growing in soil that is contaminated with toxins.
- Encourage youth to have an open mind! Trying everything at least once will help youth to identify their preferences. (If they don’t like it, “compost” it in the garden).



North Carolina State University  
4-H Plant and Soil Sciences



**Begin your grazing adventure** by creating an atmosphere of respect for personal preferences. Make sure that each member of the group feels comfortable trying something, and model respect for differences in preferences. One child might grimace at the flavor of a chive, while another might love it. Encourage youth to explore their preferences and to respect their different taste preferences. A taste-test rating scale can help youth learn about each other’s preferences and remember which plants they want to gather again. Consider creating a scale from 1 to 5:

### Taste-Test Rating Scale

1. Outstanding! This is absolutely delicious; I LOVE it! I will graze on it at every opportunity.
2. Good. This is pretty good, I could eat this again (maybe with a little ranch dressing).
3. Average. This is just okay. I don’t love it, but I don’t hate it.
4. Poor. This is not tasty, pretty gross, in fact. But I am tough, I tried it.
5. Unacceptable! This is horribly disgusting; I cannot stand it and will NEVER eat it again!



Encourage youth to try something from the garden at least once. You might be surprised at what they like to nibble.

## Incredible Edible Flowers

All of these plants can be easily grown in ornamental gardens. You can also commonly find naturalized patches of daylilies, yuccas and roses in North Carolina, as well as native stands of bee balm, and violets.



Begonia flowers come in many colors, do you think each color tastes differently?

**Begonia** (*Begonia spp.*) – Begonia flowers are deliciously tart with a range of colors from white to reds, pinks, and yellows. The sour flavor comes from oxalic acid and offers a flavor similar to rhubarb. The flowers are great as a garnish and in ice cubes, and you might even try them in your jello. Begonias are said to inspire one to wiggle with joy .

**Bee balm** (*Monarda spp.*) – Monarda flowers that come in a variety of colors, including red and pink and have a sweet taste. The wild purple species (*M. fistulosa*) has a slightly peppery flavor. Mix the petals with cream cheese for a bagel spread. Grasp the flower head by its stalk and eat like a lollipop.

**Borage** (*Borago officinalis*) – Borage has blue star-shaped flowers and a faint cucumber taste. The leaves can be cooked like spinach or added to salads. Float the flowers in cold beverages or freeze in ice cubes.

**Calendula or Pot Marigold** (*Calendula officinalis*) – Flower flavors range from a hint of honey, to tangy, peppery or even bland. Known as “poor man’s saffron,” the pretty petals have hues of yellow and orange. Liberally garnish them on any dish, from salads and soups to sandwiches or in butters. Petals can be dried and stored in a dark place.



**Carnation or pinks** (*Dianthus spp.*) – Carnation petals have a clove-like scent, but are often found to be rather tasteless. A favorite Victorian dish was carnation syrup, made by infusing a sugar solution with carnation petals and used to sweeten ice cream and cakes. Liberty Hyde Bailey (1858-1954), the father of American Horticulture, claimed the dianthus as his favorite flower.

**Chive** (*Allium schoenoprasum*, *A. tuberosum*) – Chive blossoms have a fierce onion flavor, while garlic chive blossoms offer a mild garlicky explosion. Nibble on individual flowers. Serve them whole as a garnish on poultry or seafood. They add a pinkish hue to herbal vinegar. Put blossoms in a jar, add white vinegar, seal, and steep for 5 days. Strain and save to use for salad dressings.



Garlic Chive blossoms are not only tasty for humans but provide nectar and pollen for foraging honeybees.

**Daylily** (*Hemerocallis spp.*) – Daylily petals have a crunchy and crisp texture with slightly sweet flavor. Remove the bitter white base of the flower. The flowers are great to stuff like squash blossoms. NOTE: Many lilies (particularly Asiatic lilies) contain alkaloids and are NOT edible. Daylilies may act as a laxative. Do not eat too many!



Dianthus is easy to grow and looks great in salads! Flowers come in a range of colors from pinks, reds and whites.

**Hibiscus** (*Hibiscus rosa sinensis*) – Hibiscus flowers have a cranberry-like flavor with hints of citrus. Use slightly acidic petals sparingly in salads or as garnish. Dried petals are delicious in tea.

**Lavender** (*Lavandula officinalis*) Lavender petals are aromatic and smell like perfume. Add fresh or dried chopped lavender flowers to sugar cookie or shortbread or pound cake recipes.

### Lavender-Pecan Shortbread Cookies

- 1 stick (8 tablespoons) unsalted butter, softened
- ¼ cup sugar
- ½ teaspoon vanilla extract
- ⅛ teaspoon salt
- ½ cup pecans
- 1 tablespoon dried lavender flower buds
- 1 cup all-purpose flour, 1 tablespoon reserved

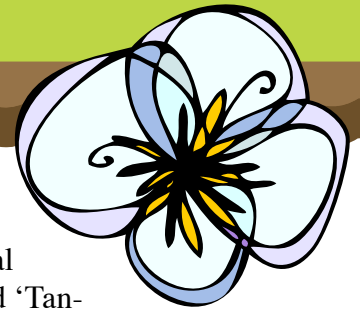


A budded stem of lavender makes a dainty swizzle stick for a summer iced-tea.

Arrange a rack in the middle of the oven and preheat oven to 375°F. Toast pecans in a dry skillet on the stove top until nicely browned. Pour nuts into a food processor with 1 tablespoon of flour. Pulse in 1-second intervals until finely chopped, about 10 seconds. Blend together butter, sugar, vanilla, salt, and pecans with a fork until combined. Whisk together lavender buds and flour. Add small amounts of flour mixture to butter mixture, blending with a fork until a soft dough forms.

Place dough onto an ungreased baking sheet. Pat it into a 10 x 4-inch rectangle, a half inch thick. With the tines of the fork, lightly decorate the edges and prick the dough all over. Score the dough into 12 cookies.

Bake the cookies until the edges are golden, about 15 minutes. Cool on the baking sheet for 10 minutes, then cut into slices with a sharp knife. Cool completely on a rack.



### Chocolate-Mint Iced Tea Lemonade



¾ cup sugar  
 ¾ cup water  
 1 cup fresh lemon juice  
 from 4-6 ripe lemons  
 1 cup chocolate mint tea  
 1-3 cups water

Begin making the chocolate mint tea by pouring boiling water over a handful of chocolate mint leaves and steeping for 10 minutes. While the tea brews, make a simple syrup by heating the sugar and

water in a saucepan until sugar is dissolved. Squeeze lemon juice from lemons, removing seeds in a bowl. Mix tea, simple syrup and lemon juice together. Dilute with 1-3 cups of water to desired strength. Blend to your taste by adding more or less lemon juice. Serve over ice with a slice of lemon and sprig of chocolate mint.

**Marigold** (*Tagetes tenuifolia*) – Eat the petals, but remove the bitter basal end. The cultivars ‘Lemon Gem’ and ‘Tangerine Gem’ have citrus flavors. Sprinkle petals like a confetti on foods. Don’t eat large quantities because the bitterness may upset some stomachs.

**Nasturtium** (*Tropaeolum majus*) – Nasturtiums are popular edible flowers for their peppery or spicy aftertaste. They have gorgeous bright-orange, yellow, cream, or maroon flowers. Shred nasturtium flowers into salads or salad dressings, or add them to any sauce for a “Zowie!” effect. Flowers can be stuffed with a cream cheese spread for an original garden hor d’oeuvre.

**Rose** (*Rosa spp.*) – Petal tastes range from very sweet to bitter, depending on the cultivar. Remove the white basal portion of the petal before eating. Rose hips, the fruit of the rose, make a deliciously tart tea. Petals can also be used to make a summer punch by mixing them with directly into the beverage. Many roses are sprayed with pesticides, so please graze on roses only in areas that you know have not been sprayed.

**Scarlet Runner Bean** (*Phaseolus coccineus*) – The flowers have a scrumptious bean or cucumber taste. The fiery orange-red flowers are perfect for any salad, ice cube, or garnish. These plants grow great on a teepee trellis. A favorite among writers who have explored flowers as food!

**Squash** (*Cucurbita pepo* cultivars) – Harvest squash blossoms in the morning before the blooms close. Remove the anthers, and shake out any residual pollen. Sauté squash blossoms in olive oil with savory vegetables. Stuff them with bread crumbs, ricotta, fresh mozzarella cheese, or rice; then steam or fry them whole.

**Violets and Pansies** (*Viola spp.*) – Violet and pansy blooms are very colorful, mild, and available fall, winter, and spring. Use whole to decorate cakes, ice creams, and other desserts. Candy them by brushing them with sugar and freezing them to use as a garnish for cookies, scones, cakes, and pies.

**Yucca** (*Yucca spp.*) – Harvest the yucca flower to nibble on the crunchy white petals. Their mild and slightly sweet taste is perfect to garnish salads and soups.



Pansies are very tolerant of cooler weather, providing a harvest of edible blooms throughout the spring and fall.

Their mild and slightly sweet taste is perfect to garnish salads and soups.



## Foraging for Fantastic Foliage

**Herbs: A Few Favorites.** These cultivated herbs grow readily in most garden soils.

**Basil** (*Ocimum basilicum*) – A pizza garden must! Basil has a great, slightly spicy taste that encourages everyone to learn Italian.

**Lemon Grass** (*Cymbopogon citratus*) – Nibble on the stems of this lusciously lemon plant! Great to slice up and toss into a stir fry with ginger and garlic!

**Chocolate Mint** (*Mentha piperita* ‘Chocolate Mint’) – A great mint for eating, with a nice flavor and no fuzziness. There is a hint of chocolate and good to eat after chives.

**Fennel** (*Foeniculum vulgare*) – The leaves have an interesting licorice taste. Pluck a small shoot off, and chew on the stem. Tasty nibbling on the flowers, seeds, and root is also highly recommended.

**Oregano** (*Origanum vulgare*) – A fired up spicy taste. Provides a different flavor when garden grazing. Greek oregano has the spiciest flavor and is another plant said to inspire dancing.

**Rosemary** (*Rosmarinus officinalis*) – As an evergreen herb in the south, rosemary offers year-round grazing opportunities. Pick sparingly because the leaves have a strong flavor. Use stems for vegetable kebabs and also on poultry and roasted potatoes.

**Sage** (*Salvia officinalis*) – Use sage leaves as a toothbrush after garden grazing. Pick a leaf, and rub it on your teeth. When you are done, simply compost in the garden. Show everyone your pearly whites – sage is said to whiten teeth.



Use sage leaves to brush your teeth and flavor poultry!

## More Fine Foliage: Greens

Channel your inner grazer, and gnaw on the leaves of these easy-to-grow greens:

**Bok Choy** (*Brassica rapa* spp. *chinensis*) – Bok choy leaves have a very mild flavor with a nice crunch. Bok choy is a good introduction to Asian greens. After the plant bolts, flowers are edible, too.

**Dinosaur Kale** (*Brassica oleracea* ‘Lacinato’) – This kale has a fantastic name that describes its vigorous growth, broccoli-like taste, and cool bumpy texture.



Swiss Chard ‘Bright Lights’ has marvelously colorful stems that are great to cook in the same water alongside your pasta.





**Lettuce** (*Lactuca sativa*) – When other adventurous greens are not appealing, lettuce is a good alternative. Try ‘Galactic’ with its dark purple leaves or ‘Freckles’ for its daring red splotches. ‘Tango’ brims with ruffles.

**Swiss Chard** (*Beta vulgaris subspecies cicla*) – Swiss chard has a very earthy flavor. Great to use the leaves for wraps; steam or dip leaves into boiling water, and fill with couscous or rice, add raisins, and toasted pine nuts. Bon appetit! Plant the cultivar ‘Bright Lights’ for a chard with colorful stems in red, yellow, orange, and pink. The stems are delicious cooked with pasta.



Lamb's quarters are a delicious addition to any dinner!



Encourage kids to harvest their snacks from the garden.



Purslane has a tasty tart flavor and are perfect in salads.

## Wondrous Weeds

Get revenge on weeds by eating them! All of these plants can be found in North Carolina. Many can be found usurping lawns and rampaging in gardens.

**Cattail** (*Typha spp.*) - This ubiquitous plant lives in marshy areas. Harvest the stalk close to the roots, and peel away the green leaves, eating the inner white stem near the base of the plant. Best eaten in the spring (they get tough and will catch in your teeth with warmer weather). The Ojibwa Indian used the leaves to weave into mats.

**Chickweed** (*Stellaria media*) – Young plants can be added raw to salads or cooked as a vegetable.

**Dandelions** (*Taraxacum officinale*) – Young leaves can be consumed raw or cooked. Although older leaves can be eaten, they are bitter and taste better cooked. Add flowers sparingly to salads for color as their taste can be a little grassy. Brew a tea from the flowers. Do not harvest dandelions from lawns where chemical fertilizers and pesticides have been applied.

**Lamb's Quarter's** (*Chenopodium album*) – Lamb's quarters is one of the earliest weeds to sprout in spring. Pick the fresh new shoots as they come up. They are very rich in iron and can be eaten raw or cooked.



**Pigweed** (*Amaranthus retroflexus*) – Eat only young leaves as older leaves become bitter. Young leaves are delicious as a cooked green; sauté garlic in a little olive oil, add greens, and toss until wilted. Seeds have been cultivated and used as a grain for centuries by Native Americans.

**Purslane** (*Portulaca oleracea*) – Purslane is one of the richest weeds in nutrients. It is loaded with vitamins C, E, and beta carotene, and rich in omega-3 fatty acids that help reduce cholesterol. Purslane tastes a bit like spinach and like spinach can be eaten raw in salads or cooked.

**Stinging Nettle** (*Urtica dioica*) – Harvest this plant with care. Its hairs cause severe stinging reactions. This one should be collected only by experienced grazers. Young leaves must be cooked until completely wilted. Add vegetable broth to a pan, and bring it to a simmer; add nettle greens and cook down. Use as you would any other green.

## Further Reading

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## Wilted Weed Stir-Fry

- ½ cup vegetable stock
- 3 tablespoons soy sauce
- 1 tablespoon apple cider
- ½ tablespoon sugar
- 2 teaspoons cornstarch dissolved in 1 tablespoon water
- ½ teaspoon rice vinegar
- ½ teaspoon toasted sesame oil
- 1 tablespoon peanut oil
- 3 tablespoons peeled fresh ginger, minced
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- ½ teaspoon crushed red pepper
- 1 pound of greens (lamb's quarters, pigweed, stinging nettle, garlic mustard, kale, chard, tatsoi).

Combine the stock, soy sauce, apple cider, sugar, cornstarch mixture, vinegar, and sesame oil in a small bowl. Heat peanut oil in a stir-fry pan or large saucepan to medium high; and add ginger, garlic, and red pepper, stirring, until fragrant and golden. Add rinsed greens with water still clinging and cook for about 2 minutes. Add the sauce mixture, and boil over high heat until slightly thickened and greens are fully cooked, about another 2 – 3 minutes. Serve over brown rice or quinoa.



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