

A GUIDE TO USING FLOWERS ON CAKES



EDIBLE, CONTACT SAFE, TOXIC: USING FLOWERS ON A WEDDING CAKE

I speak to couples all of the time who want flowers on their wedding cake. And between Pinterest, styled shoots, real wedding cakes and uninformed cake designers/florists, it's easy to assume that anything goes. But I regularly see flowers on wedding cakes that are toxic, dangerous and potentially harmful. This list is designed for other wedding cake designers, DIY wedding cakers and couples to understand how to select and use flowers on a wedding cake.

There are two aspects to choosing 'safe' flowers. Flowers must be non-toxic varieties and they need to be grown in a way which means they're safe to be around food.



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So let's cover safe to be around food first as it's kind of prerequisite knowledge before moving on to what flowers are non-toxic. You may not know that commercial flowers in the Europe are treated with a concoction of organic and inorganic fertilisers, herbicides, fungicides, pesticides, preservatives and even dyes designed to maximise profit per harvest, and ensure shelf life when they get to customers' houses (or weddings!). In fact, according to a DEFRA study, 'Ecuadorian rose producers typically use six fungicides, four insecticides, three nematicides and several herbicides'. It's an older study, so it's possible that some things have changed in the industry (positively or negatively). However, we know that flowers are still treated with a variety of chemicals, and unlike with food, there is no labelling to suggest what chemicals have been used. So 'commercial flowers' which are grown for the mass market in Europe and sold via supermarkets and most florists are not safe to be near food. You don't know how they've been handled, transported or even how long they've been sat in the water in the shop. Even if you have washed the outside, chemicals will have permeated all areas of the flower and could leach into the cake through the petals, leaves or stems. With so many unknowns, it isn't safe to put 'normal' flowers near or onto a cake.

Therefore, if you are looking for flowers that are safe to decorate your wedding cake, you need to look for flowers that are grown without any chemicals. And preferably where you know the growing conditions, can ask questions and are reassured that the flowers are safe. There are two paths to finding flowers grown without (many) chemicals. Either searching for organic flowers or sourcing directly from a grower who doesn't use any chemicals. With organic certification, chemicals are used as a last resort, and there is just a small list of allowable naturally derived pesticides that could be used on the crops. Having looked at the list of allowable chemicals, there are a number that raise an eyebrow for me, but I suspect they are all better than what we might usually find on our fruit and vegetables. Ultimately, organic flowers are a good option if you can't work directly with a grower and need to find something better than standard commercial flowers.



The best place to find flowers for a wedding cake is directly from growers. They won't advise you on safe varieties (that's what this list is for!), but they can tell you how they grow their flowers

It's also worth pointing out that in some cases, the flowers you grow in your own garden may also be safe to use on a wedding cake. If you grew them from seed, didn't use any chemicals, and are sure that they haven't been contaminated whilst in your garden (e.g. the pet toilet!) then you can be pretty confident that they would be safe to use. If you purchased the plant from a garden centre, then you just need to be careful as you have no idea how the plant has been treated before you purchased it, and I would expect them to be treated much the same as 'commercial flowers'. If you can source organically grown plants or buy them from a local grower (who can answer those questions around chemicals) then you can be more confident that they will be safe to use. Considering all options, I recommend sourcing directly from a grower where you can ask about what has been applied to the particular crop. And then consider organic flowers as backup option.



TOXIC FLOWERS

The next thing to check when sourcing flowers are which varieties are safe to be around food. If you look at the sections below, you'll find an extensive list of flower and foliage varieties that are non-toxic (and for good measure, a list of toxic flowers too!). There are some well-known poisonous flowers like hemlock, deadly nightshade and lords and ladies. But there are a huge number of other common flowers that have toxic properties and are best kept away from wedding cakes too even if they're grown naturally. On the other side of things, most flowers are non-toxic and therefore if grown properly, could come into contact with food. And finally, there are also a large number of flowers that are edible when grown to be eaten. There aren't many sources for edible flowers, but I would recommend sourcing from edible growers as they should be handling the flowers in a more careful way than a regular grower once picked.

When using edible flowers, the general advice is that you should only eat the petals and should eat in moderation. There are some varieties like pansies that you can whole, but for the most part, it's best to avoid everything except petals. So when serving your cake, you can pick off the petals from the flowers and serve them alongside the slices.

ADDING TO CAKE

You should avoid wrapping them in tin foil or cling film before poking them into the cake in case anything gets left behind. When adding your flowers, you don't want any parts of the flowers nor wrapping left behind as contaminants. If you want to keep the flowers in a small amount of water, you can use a posy pick like a mini vase. Flowers are best when they're added to a cake just a few hours before their photo opportunity as they will start to wilt.

Edible Flowers

As already mentioned, in order for a flower to be edible, it has to be a) grown in a food safe way (i.e. without chemicals) b) picked/stored/transported carefully, and c) be a non-toxic plant. Like with fruit and vegetables, not all edible plants/flowers taste the same. Celosia are edible but they taste dry and flaky like a Weetabix. Pansies are much more like a leaf of rocket, not floral just peppery. Herbs are of course chosen for their amazing flavours and rose petals will taste as they smell, floral and fragrant. So just because something is edible, doesn't mean you will enjoy eating it! However, if you're purely wanting to decorate a cake with the safest options available to you, just in case someone tries to eat them, this list of edible flowers is the place to pick from. Where possible, I would recommend sourcing these flowers from a specialist edible flower/plant supplier.

- Abutilon
- Alyssum
- Amaranth
- Begonia
- Bellis
- Borage
- Calendula
- Celosia
- Chervil
- Chive Flowers
- Chrysanthemums
- Cornflowers
- Coriander
- Cosmo
- Dahlias
- Dianthus
- Elderberries and elderflower
- Electric daisy
- Forget me nots
- Fuchsia
- Gladioli
- Lavender
- Mallow
- Nasturtiums
- Nigella
- Orchids
- Pansies
- Phlox
- Primula
- Rocket flowers
- Roses, Dog roses
- Salvia
- Sunflower
- Sweet woodruff
- Snapdragon
- Tagetes
- Tulips not leaves
- Verbascum
- Viola
- Violets
- Wild primroses
- Zinnias

Edible Flowers

Foliage

- All Herbs
- Vegetables flowers and stem
- Fennel
- Geranium leaves
- Ice plant
- Kale roses
- Lovage
- Pea shoots
- Sweet cicely fern
- Winter purslane
- Yarrow leaves

Non-Toxic / Contact Safe Food-Safe Varieties

The next list are non-toxic flowers and plants. As already explained, you should be looking for flowers grown without chemicals that have been treated carefully once picked. This will mean that some of the flowers on this list aren't practical to source 'naturally' in the UK and would have to be avoided anyway e.g. protea. Non-toxic here means that the flowers in this list shouldn't be eaten, although they won't cause you much serious harm if they transfer anything to the cake or are accidentally ingested. They are great options if you want a broader selection of flowers to choose from.

- Achillea
- Allium
- Astrantia
- Bergamot
- Busy Lizzie
- Camellia
- Camomile
- Campanula
- Cape jasmine
- Dandelion
- Echinacea
- Eryngium
- Fressia
- Geraniums
- Gerbera
- Heliconia
- Hibiscus
- Hyssopus
- Lilac
- Lisianthus
- Magnolia
- Orlaya grandiflora
- Oxeye daisy
- Passionflower
- Penoy
- Pinecones
- Protea
- Scabious
- Statice
- Stephanotis
- Stocks
- Strawflowers
- Thistle
- Trailing bellflower
- Veronica
- Viburnum
- Waxflower

Non-Toxic / Contact Safe Food-Safe Varieties

Folige

- Alexanders
- Aralia
- Archangelica
- Areca
- Cactus
- Carax
- Cordyline
- Damson
- Dracaena
- Heuchera
- Hosta
- Olive leaves
- Palm mostly
- Pampas grass
- Phormium
- Pussy willow
- Sedum
- Sorrel
- Succulents

Toxic / Dangerous Varieties

This list contains all of the flowers and plants that should be actively avoided because they are known to be toxic or harmful

Finally, this list contains all of the flowers and plants that should be actively avoided because they are known to be toxic or harmful. Although some effects might be considered less extreme, like a mild skin rash, others can be lethal. Regardless, if you're letting flowers touch something you're about to eat, even if the most it will do is cause a rash on your arm, it's probably not doing wonderful things for your insides! Most of the flowers on this list should be known to florists and gardeners anyway, as in many cases they may take extra precautions like using gloves when handling the plants.

The most commonly used toxic flowers to avoid are:

- Alstroemeria
- Eucalyptus
- Gypsophila
- Hydrangea
- Ranunculus
- Sweetpea

Toxic / Dangerous Varieties

- Agapanthus
- Aglamorpha
- Alstroemeria
- Amaryllis
- Anemone
- Anthurium
- Aster
- Azalea
- Bluebell
- Cherry blossom
- Clematis
- Cotton
- Craspedia
- Crocus
- Daffodil
- Delphinium
- Foxglove
- Frangipani
- Gypsophila
- Heather
- Hellorus
- Hyacinth
- Hydrangea

- Hypericum
- Iberis
- Iris
- Laburnum
- Lillies
- Lobelia
- Lupin
- Ornithogalum
- Pandanus
- Physalis
- Poinsettia
- Poppy
- Queen Ann lace
- Ranunculus
- Rhododendron
- Strelitzia
- Sweetpea
- Wisteria

FOLIAGE

- Aloe
- Beargrass
- Dustymiller
- English yew
- Eucalyptus
- Fern
- Ivy
- Holly
- Mistletoe
- Philodendron
- Ruscus



DECORATING A CAKE WITH FLOWERS

I absolutely love flowers. They're so colourful and are the perfect addition to any cake. Although in some cases you can use flowers from your florist, in most cases, you will have to source specialist flowers or work with sugar or silk flowers. In this post, I'll talk about some of the options you have for decorating your cake's with flowers...

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FRESH EDIBLE FLOWERS

One way to decorate a cake with flowers is with specially grown organic flowers. There are only a few specialist suppliers who grow edible varieties of flowers (i.e. non-poisonous varieties) in a chemical free, organic certified way. This means you can eat them – pick off a petal or throw the whole thing in! Like the fruit and vegetables you find in the supermarket, these flowers are grown to decorate food and be eaten.

Varieties can be limited as there are only certain flowers that are suitable, and availability will be limited to when they are growing naturally. Perfect for natural or eco wedding cakes.

Fresh flowers can be used with buttercream, ganache or fondant cakes whatever your personal taste.

Varieties available: begonia, calendula, chrysanthemum, cornflower, cosmos, dahlia, fuchsia, lavender, nasturtium, pansies, roses, tulips, violas, zinnias, and herbs, among others.



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CHEMICAL FREE FRESH FLOWERS

In the last few years there are 'home-grown' florists popping up. These are the people who are growing their own flowers, tending to them and letting them grow a bit more 'naturally'. They aren't spraying their flower beds with chemicals, they're letting the strongest survive. So when you get flowers from these florists, you know exactly how the flowers have been treated. Even better, they're likely to be more local which is a bonus for some couples.

Not all florists will be able to tell you which varieties of flower are non-poisonous. The onus is on you as a food supplier to know what is safe to use. They can look amazing and can be used in all sorts of different ways, from simple arrangements to larger statements. The selection or colours may be more limited than available in a commercial florist, and availability will again be limited to when they are growing naturally. Perfect for natural or eco wedding cakes, but may be harder to match with imported flowers used by commercial florists.

Some commonly used, but potentially harmful varieties: anemone, bird of paradise, carnation, eucalyptus, gypsophila, hydrangea, iris, lilies, pampas grass, peony, poppy, ranunculus, sweet pea.



FLOWERS FROM A FLORIST

Unfortunately, when you buy flowers from a high-street florist, garden centre or even supermarket, you have no idea what chemicals might be lurking. At the very least, it's likely that the flowers will have been treated with high levels of pesticides and insecticides. This means that mass growth flower farms maximise their revenue and don't lose any crops. Once they've been picked, flowers are often then treated with chemicals to ensure they stay fresher for longer, before they travel across the globe.

None of these chemicals will be selected for their safety if consumed, like those for fruit and vegetables are, because these flowers are never supposed to be eaten. These treatments make them amazing for decorating your wedding venue, but dangerous if they make their way into the cake. Florists are also not trained in all things edible, so they won't necessarily know how to prepare flowers for decorating cakes, how to insert them into cakes without ruining them, nor which varieties are toxic if ingested. Being able to incorporate your wedding flowers into your cake is a fantastic idea, but I would always recommend doing it in a way that avoids contact with the cake. Finding creative ways to arrange flowers around the cake can limit your options a bit, and is often best paired with a more simple cake design. Perfect for couples wanting to match their cake decoration to the venue, or wanting to make a statement.

. As long as your flowers aren't touching the cake, and can't drip onto the cake, there's no reason to be limited to non-toxic varieties.



SILK OR FAUX FLOWERS

This has become one of my favourite ways to decorate wedding cakes with flowers and is also the most cost effective. It can be less wasteful than other ways if you re-use the flowers afterwards too. Sometimes, couples are on-board about silk flowers from the beginning. They like the colour options, or flower varieties that you can get (all year round) with silk flowers. Some of them like the price, or the fact that unlike fresh flowers, they don't die so can be reused.

Other couples may have picked an unusual colour palette and know they won't be able to find fresh flowers in their shade. But some couples just aren't sure about silk flowers, and I get it. Silk flowers, courtesy of the pre-2000 era, have a bad reputation. People think they look tacky, old-fashioned or just obviously fake. However, silk flowers have improved hugely over the last few years and are now beautiful. Sometimes, you really do have to take a second glance to tell that flowers are silk, not real! Silk flowers are very realistic, but they are not 100% lifelike. If you have a particularly judgy bunch of wedding guests, they may have something to say. I say don't invite them, but that's me! However, silk flowers are perfect for unusual colour palettes (like strong, dark colours), large flower arrangements, and keeping budgets down. They work well with buttercream or fondant cakes.



SUGAR FLOWERS

There is something very wedding-y about sugar flowers, I think it's how delicate they are. They really do require a lot of patience and skills. I love to make sugar flowers. The best sugar flowers look almost as good as real flowers, and when put together in arrangements, add huge impact to a wedding cake. They take hours and hours to make properly and are the most high-end way to decorate wedding cakes with flowers. One thing to be aware of though, most sugar flowers are not actually edible. Although they are made of sugar, because they're commonly 'built' with wires and polystyrene centres, you can't eat them. However, they are perfectly safe decorations for cakes. Sugar flowers, when done properly, are amazing handmade decorations. However, they are a tricky skill to master

They can also increase the price quite quickly if you're looking for more than a small arrangement. Perfect for traditional, luxurious wedding cakes in grand locations! Also great when flowers are out of season or for more unique colour schemes. They work best with fondant or ganache cakes.



WAFER PAPER FLOWERS

The final addition to this list, wafer paper flowers. They are definitely a newer technique. Using edible rice paper, cake artists can create fantastic flower arrangements. When made without wires they are completely edible.

They are definitely a more unique and modern way of making flowers. Some cake makers can make some phenomenally realistic wafer paper flowers. I'm currently enjoying the process of improving this technique and love the results.

As wafer paper is often used for adding texture to cake with ruffles or abstract designs, you can use flowers to tie the design together. It's difficult to make strong colours with wafer paper, so this style works best with pastel colour schemes. Perfect for couples who are looking for something a little bit different, perhaps in a quirky venue. They work best with fondant cakes, but can be used with buttercream and ganache cakes too.



