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From Tacos to Canvas Inspiring Edible Flowers



Squash blossoms (Cucurbita spp.).

Mexico is one of the world's most biologically and culturally diverse countries, as can be seen, among other things, in its food. The wealth of flora, fauna, and fungi species has led to regional and traditional cuisines with colorful, nutritious, delicious dishes that for thousands of years have fed the inhabitants of this bio-geographical land we know today as Mexico. This biological wealth that feeds us is known as the Mesoamerican diet, which evolved together with the traditional *milpa* agricultural system.¹

Down through the centuries, the Mesoamerican peoples have developed a close, respectful relationship with their natural surroundings, a relationship in which the flora also acts as a link between communities and generations. One example of this is the use of wild plants like flowers and edible herbs as fresh vegetables. Today, when healthy eating has become a priority, the Mesoamerican diet stands out for its high nutritional and cultural value.

Using flowers in cooking is a distinctive aspect of the Mesoamerican diet. Many plants produce more flowers than only those that turn into fruit, and these flowers can be consumed before harvest season, when food can be scarce. Natural selection has forged the flowers to attract pollinators, and they not only offer unique, subtle flavors to different dishes, but also add an explosion of shapes and colors to this culinary celebration. Consuming nutrient-rich flowers complements the diet and is an example of the ingeniousness for using natural resources, as well as an expression of the cultural, historic, and social identity of the Mesoamerican peoples.

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These are some of the flowers most commonly used in Mexican cuisine:

Squash blossom (*Cucurbita* spp.). This is a vital part of the *milpa*; the male flowers can be harvested without affecting the plant's reproduction, leaving the female flowers to bear the fruit. They offer a very special flavor to cream and clear soups, stews, and the traditional, beloved *quesadillas*, or turnovers.

Huauzontle (*Chenopodium berlandieri*), also known as Aztec broccoli. Clusters of tiny green flowers surrounded by succulent leaves in a tender, meaty bunch, excellent for cooking. It is consumed mainly stuffed with cheese, dipped in batter and fried and then covered with tomato sauce or *cascabel* (rattlesnake) chili pepper sauce.

Colorin (*Erythrina americana*), the flower of a legume tree. These characteristic red flowers with tubular petals are very attractive to hummingbirds and are used to make a mirepoix (or a fragrant vegetable base for other dishes), tamales, or as patties bound together with egg.

Bean flowers (*Phaseolus* spp.). The bean plant not only gives us its seeds, rich in highly nutritional proteins, but its flowers, which are also edible. Veracruz, Chiapas, and Oaxaca are the states that use these flowers the most, incorporating them into tamales, *texmoles* (thick, pre-Hispanic soups), tacos, or stews with meat or eggs.

Maguay flowers (*Agave* spp.), also known as *gualumbos* or agave stalk flowers. This is one of Mexico's most traditional edible flowers and is highly regarded in arid-climate rural communities.

Mexico has more than a dozen native edible flowers, each with its own botanical characteristics and culinary applications. They not only enhance the beauty of the dishes but also testify to the wealth and diversity of the Mesoamerican flora.



Yucca flowers (*Yucca* spp.).



Dahlia (*Dahlia* spp.).

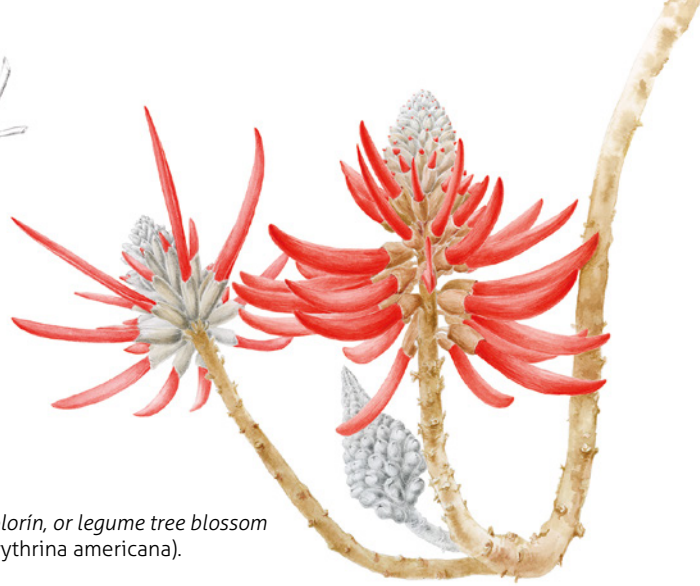
The dissemination of these flavors and knowledge, as well as their role in Mexico's nutrition and culture, is essential for preserving and valuing our heritage.



Maguay blossom (*Agave* spp.).



Colorin, or legume tree blossom
(*Erythrina americana*).



Blossom of the tepexilote or pacaya palm
(*Chamaedora tepexilote*).

The dissemination of these flavors and knowledge, as well as their role in Mexico's nutrition and culture, is essential for preserving and valuing our heritage. In a world in which globalization and industrialization threaten to homogenize food cultures, it is crucial to underline the importance of these ancestral practices and their importance today. Promoting the understanding of the *milpa*, edible wild herbs, and the use of flowers in cooking not only helps preserve traditions, but also offers sustainable, nutritious solutions to the food and environmental challenges we face. The *milpa* and the Mesoamerican diet are models of balanced nutrition that is respectful of the environment and can inspire other regions of the world.

Preserving this knowledge is not only a way of honoring the region's cultural heritage. It is also a strategy for dealing with the current nutritional and sustainability challenges and of recognizing and celebrating the knowledge and ingenuity of the Mesoamerican peoples, of giving voice to their legacy, and of ensuring that their agricultural and culinary practices continue to be valued and applied while seeking a healthier, more just, and sustainable future.



Bean blossoms
(*Phaseolus* spp.).

Botanical illustration is a form of art and science that has played a crucial role in documenting and studying plants throughout history.

Although the need to represent the natural world that surrounds us has existed from the beginning of human history, as can be seen in cave paintings or pre-Hispanic and colonial codices, scientific illustrations became a way to objectively represent the human body and nature in all their detail. The first form of this discipline arose in eighteenth-century Europe after the Enlightenment's scientific revolution spawned by its new wave of information contributed to facilitating order in that chaotic knowledge.

A scientific illustration is not only an aesthetically pleasing image; it is also something that contributes valuable information about the topic in question. Botanical illustration can represent complex concepts much more clearly and effectively than a text or even a photograph.

In today's digital age, this kind of illustration continues to be a valued activity and an excellent tool for scientific and educational dissemination. Looking more deeply into the topic, we could speak of scientific illustration and naturalist illustration: the first rigorously expresses scientific concepts and aims



Magnolia
(*Magnolia mexicana*).

to communicate and disseminate science. Naturalist illustration, on the other hand, can take certain licenses, and its aim is to show the beauty of the natural world. In any case, the division between the two is very subtle and both are a mixture of art and science involving a fascination with nature.

Botanical illustration can transmit knowledge accessibly and attractively. This kind of art spurs interest in botany, inspiring new generations of scientists, artists, and nature enthusiasts. At Opuntia Biodiversidad Alimendaria,² we produce our own botanical illustrations of the topics we deal with. To do that, we invite talented illustrators from different places and with different styles, recognizing their valuable work and also giving botanical illustration and its enormous potential a voice as a means of expression and dissemination. In this case, of the flora that nourishes us and Mexico's food cultures. **MM**

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Notes

- 1 The *milpa* is a cultivation system that combines several crops simultaneously on one piece of land, invented by pre-Columbian peoples and used extensively today. [Translator's Note.]
- 2 Find out more about the project at www.opuntia.com.mx.



Huauzontle, or Aztec broccoli
(*Chenopodium berlandieri*).

