

Edible

arrangements

How do you pick your table decorations - by colour, by size or style? LAURA CARTLEDGE discovers another way which offers food for thought.

Saying a table arrangement 'looks good enough to eat' might sound like a strange compliment, but not if it is one of Sushma Winsor's creations.

The Billingham businesswoman is on a mission to make people look afresh at flowers.

"The whole concept just made complete sense," she recalls, explaining how her own big day sowed the seeds.

"The venue I had chosen was Knepp Castle Estate with their whole ethos of putting everything back to nature. It just seemed wrong to put in flowers flown in from thousands of miles away.

"We had an allotment and friends always said it looked amazing and colourful, but it wasn't quite ready."

Instead Sushma set about finding local growers, with a focus on plants that are at home both in pots and on plates.

"From the cheese boards to the starters we put edible flowers on everything and people kept looking and saying 'what are these colourful things, are they petals? Can we eat them?'," she smiles.

"The answer was yes you can, some just look pretty but others even complement the flavour and smells."

As well as adding another dimension to the dishes, another bonus was the displays could be taken home by guests and kept.

"A year later, when they were coming back into the garden, people were telling us the main thing they remembered was the flowers," Sushma admits. "I thought hang on a second..."

In a quest to see if she could be on to something, nearby nurseries were the first port of call.

The response was mixed, with Sushma wary of the ones that refused to show her



Apothecary bars have proved popular

behind the scenes.

She suspects this could be to do with the fact places buy in the plugs from abroad, plant them up, and after 12 weeks they can call them 'British grown'.

"I set about the challenge of finding nurseries that said 'yes come in, see what we are doing' - that is when I realised they were the ones I wanted to work with," enthuses Sushma.

"There were some local growers but not many - it has taken off in the last few years."

So, it seems, has Sushma's company Lettuce Flowers, which has catered for an array of high profile events including the Observer Food Monthly Awards and a gala evening at the Royal Albert Hall.

This corporate direction has been all part of her cunning plan.

"If the big bods start using it on their tables it filters down to everyone else," she says. "You have to start big otherwise you are just blowing a little whistle."

With seasonal and edible setting the brief, the key question for clients isn't 'what are your colours' but 'what is your menu?'

"A recent one was the HedgeFund Investors Awards," explains Sushma. "They

were serving lamb - so they wanted mint in the arrangement - with roast potatoes, so they wanted rosemary.

"You can still have certain colours but you can make them more interesting, more charming," she adds.

"I believe if you get people excited, then they will remember the event - it is about engaging, touching and seeing it on the plate."

While Sushma's previous career in the fashion industry proved sustainability and eco concerns 'can take an age' to come to the fore, she hopes the current food revolution will stretch to other things on the table.

Her wish is that it will encourage 'people to experiment' more.

"I want people to be as excited about plants as I am," she confesses. "You don't need new taste buds, you just need your old ones reactivating."

"People will say to me 'I never use sage in the summer' and I tell them to try it on a barbecue."

"Most people like familiarity, so it is about giving them something simple, something they recognise, with a little twist."

Sushma's suggestions include adding

Sushma Winsor

Picture: Arthur Hutchins



lemon balm to your G&T for that citrus note or using blue sage flowers as an addition to your cheese and crackers.

“They have a sweet smell to them which goes beautifully with goats’ cheese. It looks and tastes amazing.”

The nature of what she does means Sushma is no stranger to a look of disbelief.

A great example is her ‘nasturtium salsa’ which has such a heat from the seeds people refuse to believe there’s no chilli.

Speaking to Sushma makes you both hungry and inspired, so it isn’t a surprise to learn nature has been a long-standing obsession.

“I have always loved plants, from a young age I used to go and get lost in the garden,” she grins.

“Even aged eight people couldn’t touch my roses, I was very possessive of them.

“With gardening, plants and food you are always learning and I love that.”



The aim is for people to engage with their food



Observer Food Monthly Awards decoration.

Picture: Alicia Carter for the Observer



Nasturtium and potato salad

To find out more about Sushma’s work, visit www.lettuceflowers.co.uk