



2021 – Year of the Sunflower

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

One thing just about everyone can agree on is that cheery, yellow sunflowers are a happy sight to see. The majority of the 70 or so species originated in North and Central America and they have been cultivated by Native Americans for perhaps the last 3 to 5 thousand years. Domesticated seeds were found dating back to 2100 BCE in Mexico. Supposedly, the Incas worshipped sunflowers because of their resemblance to the all life-giving sun.

In times past, sunflowers were especially valued as a source of food and medicine. Native Americans ground the seeds into meal which was used to make breads, soups and other food items. Sunflower infusions were brewed to treat various illnesses and the juice from the stems was applied to wounds. The seeds and flower petals were also used as dye plants.



Sunflower by dmp,2021.

Annual sunflowers (*Helianthus annuus*) are quite easy to grow. Given full sun, a moderately fertile soil and adequate moisture, they will continue blooming until fall frosts halt flower production. Their Latin name is derived from the Greek ‘helios’ meaning sun and ‘anthos’ for flower. Keep in mind that the taller ones may need to be staked especially if late summer storms are expected. I have had luck grouping my sunflowers together and corralling them with tall stakes and rope.

Sunflowers are best started from seed as they quickly produce deep roots to hold up their heavy stems and flower heads. Plant seeds early to mid-May, depending on the weather, about 1 to 1 ½ inch deep and at least 6 inches apart. Plan on thinning the plants to provide more space between them when true leaves develop. Spacing will depend on the cultivar so follow suggestions on the seed packet. Often sunflowers will self-seed. Transplant to desired location as soon as the first set of true leaves forms. If purchasing cell packs of seedlings, look for young plants and get them into the ground as soon as possible so a good root system can get established.

Curiously, sunflowers are heliotropic, meaning their flowers move to follow the sun. They face east in the morning and turn towards the west as the day advances. During the night, they reposition themselves to greet the morning sun. This movement only occurs when the flowers are young and heavy seed heads have not fully developed. Eventually, the flowers just remain facing east. Perhaps they warm up earlier in the morning facing this direction, which may be more attractive to pollinators.

Depending on the variety, sunflowers will produce the larger black striped seeds desirable for snacking both by humans and larger bird species, or smaller black ones which draw many species of songbirds. If the intent is to supply a food source for winged creatures, one can simply leave the seed heads on the plants, and goldfinches, chickadees and others will feast on them.

Ornamental sunflowers fall into several categories. Semi-dwarfs range from about 4 to 8 feet tall and are multi-stemmed or branching. They were primarily bred for cut flowers and many are pollen-less. Pollen-less sunflowers are male sterile hybrids. They do produce abundant nectar and enough seeds (if grown with pollen producing sunflower varieties) to keep our resident goldfinches appeased. Both cut flower growers and allergy sufferers appreciate the lack of pollen.

Some purists prefer sunflowers that produce both nectar and pollen to encourage more of our native pollinator species. 'Autumn Beauty' ranks high on my list with yellow, bronze, and bicolor flowers on tall plants. 'Italian White' (*H. debilis*) sports lovely, medium-size, creamy flowers and produces abundant seeds.

Double-flowered 'Teddy Bear', 'Lemonade' and 'Goldy Double' are a little shorter with powderpuff yellow or orangey-gold blossoms. Multi-stemmed varieties, only 3 to 5 feet high, with generously-sized blooms include 'Moulin Rouge', 'Valentine', 'Chocolate' and 'Ikarus'.

When there's limited space, try dwarf sunflowers. 'Sunspot', 'Big Smile', 'Suntastic Yellow' and 'Firecracker' produce good size sunflower blossoms on plants typically less than 2 feet tall. While they may look disproportionate to you, your child will probably be enthralled with them. One of my favorite dwarfs for bedding is 'Music Box', a multi-stemmed two-footer with bicolored flowers in yellow, gold and mahogany. I grew it a few years ago, was quite pleased with how it did in the garden, but the stems were too short for cutting.

Perennial buffs looking for a late summer rush of delightful golden blooms, may want to try the perennial sunflower (*H. multiflorus*). Six to 8 feet tall, this species needs room to roam but what a striking sight in the setting late summer sun if you have the right spot.

For questions on growing sunflowers or on any other home or garden topic, feel free to call the UCONN Home & Garden Education Center, toll-free, at 877.486.6271, visit their web site at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension Center.