

## Sunflowers

Sunflowers are more popular now than ever before. Just look in any seed catalog and you'll be astounded by the many varieties of sunflowers that are now available – big ones, little ones, single flowers, double flowers, yellow, red, creamy white, even bicolors! Sunflowers are easy to grow, and there are so many wonderful new varieties available that there's sure to be at least one for you.



### Which One to Choose?

With so many to choose from, it's a good idea to think about what types of sunflowers you want to grow and where you want to grow them. Sunflowers can be planted as a hedge or as a screen to hide a compost pile or other unsightly areas. They can be used to add color near a wall or fence, form a barrier or windbreak, or provide shade. Sunflowers, especially pollenless varieties, make wonderful cut flowers, and some dwarf varieties look great when dried. Many people grow sunflowers to harvest and roast the seeds for snacking. And, of course, the birds like them too!

Sunflowers grow either as a single-stem plant or a multi-branched plant. Single-stem varieties produce one large flower per plant, followed by smaller blossoms. Planting single-stem sunflowers successively every two weeks through the summer will ensure continuous bloom. Branching types, also known as multiflowering, produce multiple stems and bunches of flowers. Multiflowering plants bloom over a longer period of time, although the first flowers are usually the best.

The type of sunflowers that most people are familiar with is *Helianthus annuus*, the annual sunflowers. These are grown for their attractive flowers and come in many colors and sizes. The palette of colors now available ranges from the creamy white of 'Italian White' and the orange of 'Orange Sun Bright' to the red, burgundy, and bronze of 'Prado Red,' 'Evening Sun,' and 'Velvet Queen.' Striped versions, dappled types, and bicolors, such as 'Sunset,' 'Floristan,' and 'Indian Blanket,' are also available. Annual sunflowers do produce edible seeds, but they are very small.

If you want to grow sunflowers as a hedge or screen, or to eat the seeds, choose one of the tall varieties with larger seeds. The most popular variety for edible seeds is 'Mammoth Russian,' which can reach 12 feet tall and has huge heads full of thin-shelled striped seeds. 'Russian Giant' has 20-inch seed heads and can exceed 10 feet tall, and 'Kong' grows up to 12 feet tall. Other tall varieties to grow for seeds include 'Giganteus,' 'Giant Grey Stripe,' 'Jumbo,' and 'Paul Bunyan Hybrid.'

Fortunately, giant sunflowers aren't the only type available. In fact, some of the new dwarf varieties never get taller than 2 feet. They are perfect for small gardens, the front of a border, or containers. The flowers of most dwarf sunflowers resemble daisies and are excellent cut flowers, especially the pollenless varieties. Dwarf varieties include 'Sundance Kid,' 'Big Smile,' 'Pacino,' and 'Elf.' These all grow to about 12 to 24 inches tall and produce 3- to 5-inch flowers. For large flowers on slightly taller plants, try 'Kid Stuff.' It's only 32 inches tall, but its gold flowers are up to 10 inches in diameter.

Pollenless sunflowers, which were introduced in 1988, are good for cutting and using in arrangements because they don't drop pollen. Pollenless hybrids include 'Sunbeam,' 'Sunbright,' and 'Parasol.' 'Sunbright' is also excellent for drying. Other pollenless varieties to try include 'Del Sol,' 'Sunrich Lemon,' 'Sunrich Orange,' and 'Moonshadow.'

Sunflowers with double flowers range in color from orange to yellow and their blooms resemble large chrysanthemums. Double sunflowers are good for cutting, because even though most produce pollen, their double petals help keep the pollen from dropping. 'Golden Pheasant,' 'Giant Sungold,' 'Lion's Mane,' and 'Tohoku Yae' all produce large (about 7-inch) golden yellow flowers and get about 6 feet tall. 'Teddy Bear' is a popular dwarf variety with fluffy double flowers. Semi-double versions, such as 'Tiger's Eye,' feature a central cluster of small petals surrounded by longer ray petals.

Sunflowers are also available as mixtures of different types, such as single-flowered, double-flowered, and bicolors, all in one package. Tall mixes (usually over 6 feet) include 'Autumn Beauty,' 'Color Fashion Mixed,' and 'Sunforest Mix.' 'Music Box' is a dwarf mix with 4- to 5-inch blossoms in an array of single colors and bicolors on 28-inch plants. Some mixes, such as 'Fun 'n Sun,' 'Fantasia,' and 'The Joker,' include seeds of many colors of sunflowers that are all pollenless.



## Growing Sunflowers

As their name suggests, sunflowers require full sun for at least 6 hours each day. If they have to stretch for the sunlight, they may get spindly and fall over. Because sunflowers will turn to face the sun, make sure you plant them where they will face you, not your neighbors.

Sunflowers will do well in just about any type of soil, but they prefer fertile soil that drains well and contains compost or rotted manure. Poor drainage will stunt their growth. Sow your sunflower seeds after all danger of frost is past, when the soil temperature is at least 50 degrees F. Seeds can be sown through June for a continuous supply of flowers. If sowing after June (even up to the first week of July), choose a dwarf variety, as they don't have as much growing to do. Create a furrow about 4 inches deep, and place seeds about 6 inches apart and 1/2 inch deep. When the seedlings reach about 6 inches high, thin them to 1 1/2 to 2 feet apart. Gradually fill in the furrow so that new roots will grow along the buried stem and produce a deeper-rooted plant. If you're growing sunflowers for cutting and arranging, leave them at their original 6-inch spacing. This will produce smaller flowers on longer stems, which are better for cutting. Remove weeds by hand for the first four to five weeks after sowing.

Although sunflowers will grow with little effort, some tender loving care can produce sunflowers that are the envy of the neighborhood. Sunflowers can withstand hot dry weather and even an occasional drought, but will benefit from regular watering. To help prevent diseases, avoid getting the leaves wet. Sunflowers should not be water stressed when they're young or about 20 days before and after flowering.

If you want many blossoms rather than a single head, continually pinch the branches to produce bushier plants and more heads. If the flower heads get very large and heavy, tie the stalks to stakes to keep the plants upright. High winds and heavy rain may topple sunflowers that are unsupported.

Sunflowers don't require fertilizer unless your soil is very poor, but you can pamper them with some compost, bat guano, or 5-10-10 fertilizer. Just don't overdo it – too much fertilizer can result in bushy plants with weak stems and few flowers.

## Diseases and Pests

Sunflowers can be susceptible to verticillium wilt, Sclerotinia or white mold, downy mildew, rust, and powdery mildew, especially when they're grown in the same location year after year. Clean garden practices and crop rotation will help prevent these diseases.

Sunflower head moths, aphids, and whiteflies are sometimes a problem. Other common pests are the stem borer and stem maggot. These are both quite damaging because they tunnel into the stem and kill all the vegetation above the point of entry. Again, clean garden practices will help keep these pests away.

Use slug bait or barriers around young seedlings to protect them from damage. As the seed heads mature, keep birds from eating the seeds by using fabric row covers or covering the flower heads with netting or cheesecloth. Frightening devices and human activity may also help to deter birds.

## Harvesting and Roasting Seeds

On edible types of sunflowers, the seeds will mature about three months after sowing. The flower heads will hang down and turn greenish-yellow on the back. Cut off the seed heads with about one foot of stalk attached and hang them in a warm, dry, well-ventilated, rodent-free place. Place cheesecloth or a paper bag with holes in it over each head to catch any seeds that may drop during drying. When the heads are thoroughly dry, rub off any remaining seeds and store them in airtight containers.

To roast sunflower seeds, place them in 2 quarts of water to which ½ cup of salt has been added, bring to a boil, and simmer for 2 hours. Drain them well and dry them on absorbent paper or paper towels. Put them in a shallow pan in a 300 degree oven for 30 to 40 minutes, stirring occasionally. Remove from the oven and add butter (about 1 teaspoon for each cup of seeds) and salt to taste.

## Seed Sources

Sunflower seeds are available at most local garden nurseries, through mail order catalogs, and on the Internet. Sources include:

[Stokes Seeds](#). 1-800-396-9238

[Territorial Seed Company](#). 1-800-626-0866

[Burpee](#). 1-800-888-1447

[Johnny's Selected Seeds](#). (207) 861-3901

[Park Seed](#). 1-800-213-0076

[Seeds of Change](#) 1-888-762-7333

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