



Grow a Bright Soniashnyk for Ukraine

Delicious seeds, oil and support for Ukraine are all tied to this amazing plant.
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Their national flower, sunflowers across the world represent Ukraine's Victory Garden.

by Carol Barany for Yakima Valley Master Gardeners

I still remember stories my grandmother told me about the Victory Garden she planted in our postage-stamp-sized yard during World War II. Hers was one of at least 20 million Victory Gardens planted to ensure an adequate food supply and as a proud and tangible show of support for American troops fighting overseas. My father was one of them.

The abundance of sunflowers (*soniashnyk*) that bloom across Ukraine made it the country's national flower. Since the Russian invasion, the sunflower has become a worldwide symbol of resistance and unity for Ukraine's people. In a show of solidarity, many

American seed companies have donated their sunflower seed sales to humanitarian relief efforts. Baker Creek Heirloom Seed, a small company based in Missouri, raised \$1.6 million in two and a half days, sending support “one seed at a time.”

These days, we’re busy planning and planting new gardens. Why not dedicate some space to a Sunflower Victory Garden? One of the easiest flowers to grow, sunflowers love heat and thrive in Yakima’s summers. Whether you garden on several acres or in a few pots on your porch, you can grow sunflowers.

It won’t be the first time that the sunflower has been a symbol of hope and restoration in the face of destruction.

According to a story in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch last month, long-taprooted sunflowers are hyperaccumulators, plants that can take up high concentrations of toxic materials in their tissues. After the 1945 bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, along with the more recent nuclear disasters in Chernobyl, Ukraine, and Fukushima, Japan, fields of sunflowers were planted on contaminated lands to help absorb radiation from the soil.

Native Americans domesticated the sunflower 4,000 years ago. In the process, the branching, multi-headed, small seeded wild flower was transformed into an unbranched giant with a larger single flower spilling with big oilseeds. This oil provided fat, a vital supplement to the lean meat in their diets. Carried to Europe by Spanish explorers around 1500, sunflowers were mainly grown as ornamentals until Peter the Great of Russia recognized the sunflower’s potential as a food and oil crop. By the late 19th century, Russian farmers had planted over 2 million acres.

Immigrants departing for America brought enough seed with them that by 1880, American seed companies were advertising the ‘Mammoth Russian,’ a variety still widely grown today.

Today, Ukraine has the highest production of sunflower seeds in the world. The 2021 crop was harvested and is in storage waiting to be processed. How much of that crop will be lost, and whether a new crop will be planted this spring, is uncertain.

John and I have always had a wild summer garden full of sunflowers to provide pollen and nectar for bees, seeds for birds, and flowers for bouquets. It takes very little work on our part. Plant sunflowers once, and they will joyfully reseed for decades.

With big seeds that are easy to handle and quick to sprout, planting sunflowers introduced our children to gardening. As soon as the plants were as tall as each child, we tied a colorful string at that point on the stem. The kids checked daily and were amazed at how quickly the string was carried skyward. They also had the opportunity to observe heliotropism up close. Sunflower heads turn to track the sun from east to west each day.

If you're growing sunflowers mainly for seed (or to win a ribbon at the fair), look for varieties like Mammoth Grey Stripe or Mammoth Russian, which produce a single stupendous head on plants 12 feet tall.

Not every gardener has room for these giants. Leave it to plant breeders to develop a wide range of varieties under 6' tall. Blooming longer and more abundantly, these plants are short enough to harvest without climbing a ladder. You can easily find cut-flower varieties for bouquets, and true dwarf varieties barely 2 feet tall for growing in containers.

Seed can be direct sown as soon as the weather warms. Many cut flower varieties mature in 60-70 days, so you can plant well into July for autumn bouquets. For a continuous harvest, sow every 7-10 days throughout spring and early summer. Regular deadheading always yields more flowers.

Our hearts ache for Ukraine. What can we do? We can pray for peace. We can donate to aid organizations. We can help Ukrainian refugees in the

United States. As gardeners, whether it's a single pot or an entire garden, we can plant sunflowers. It's one small way to show our respect and support.

