

## BELL COUNTY MASTER GARDENER

### Tip of the Week

By Beverly Wickersham

#### “The Flower that Looks at the Sun”

The Common Sunflower, *Helianthus annuus*, grows from 3 to 8 feet tall and thrives in the dry summer soils throughout the Central Texas area. The scientific name comes from the Greek words *helios* (sun) and *anthos* (flower). The Spanish name “Mirasol” means “looks at the sun.” While the plant’s flower head is developing it does indeed turn its face to the sun as it rises in the east and then follows the sun on its journey across the sky to the west. The flower is still during the night, but at sunrise it swings around to the east to begin tracking its namesake. Once the flower head matures, it no longer follows the sun. The flower heads grow singly at the top of the flower stem.

This tribute to the sunflower appears in the song, “Believe Me, If All Those Enduring Young Charms” whose words were written by Thomas Moore.

*The heart that has truly loved never forgets,  
But as truly loves on to the close,  
As the sunflower turns on her god when he sets,  
The same look which she turn'd when he rose.*

The Indians of North America were cultivating giant sunflowers before the Europeans reached the New World. The Hopi Indians domesticated a large-headed sunflower with purple-shelled achenes (seeds). They ate the seeds and soaked the purple shells in water to make a dye for decorating baskets and their own bodies. The leaves were smoked as a tobacco substitute. Native Americans taught the early settlers how to use parts of the plant to treat snakebites and other wounds.

In the early fall, look in low, moist places for the Maximilian Sunflower, *Helianthus maximiliani*, named for the naturalist Prince Maximilian of Weid Neuweid (Germany) who explored the Western states in the 1830’s. The flowers of this species are scattered along the upper half of the plant and grow from leaf axils on stems 12 inches long from the bottom of the plant to 3 inches long near the top.

Farmers in the Panhandle and on the south plains grow hundreds of acres of large sunflowers for the seeds. The seeds are sold as birdseed, or milled into low-fat oil, or shipped to Mexico or Spain for roasting and packaging as snack food.

Reference: [Legends & Lore of Texas Wildflowers](#) by Elizabeth Silverthorne. Have any questions? Just email [ask.bcmga@gmail.com](mailto:ask.bcmga@gmail.com)

