

Summer Sunflowers – Following the Sun Across the Sky

By Jane and Ray McGowen

No plant depicts “summer” more than a sunflower. Often thought to resemble an image of the sun, sunflowers have big, daisy-like faces of vibrant yellow petals and brown centers that mature into hefty heads that are filled with seeds. Sunflower’s botanical name is *Helianthus*, and they are native to the western hemisphere. Native Americans cultivated the sunflower not only for its ornamental value but also for food, oil, medicine and dye. Conquistadors exported the flowers to other parts of the world around 1500 and they are now grown throughout Europe, Britain and Russia.

Each sunflower’s head consists of smaller flowers. The yellow petals that surround the outside of the flower are called ray florets, and they cannot reproduce. But, the large disc florets in the middle where the seeds develop contain both male and female parts. This allows the sunflower to self pollinate, or, receive pollen transported by insects.

If you have ever carefully observed a sunflower, you will have noticed they stand tall facing east at dawn, looking straight at the rising sun. As the sun moves throughout the day, the sunflower follows its light, looking up, then over, and finally westward as the sun melts into the horizon. This behavior is called heliotropism, or, following the orientation of the sun. At night during the darkness, the sunflowers turn their faces to the east, anticipating the sun’s return. Researchers have shown that the sunflower’s internal clock and its ability to detect light work in tandem, therefore, turning on growth genes at just the right time to allow the stems to bend with the movement of the sun.

Sunflowers do this until they get older and heavier during seed production. At that point, the stems will stiffen and the mature flower heads will generally remain facing east. Research has also shown that flowers facing east get a head start in warming up for pollination - insects are more attracted to warm flowers than cool flowers.

Sunflowers are heat tolerant, resistant to pests and generally easy to grow provided they are not planted in water logged soil. They have long taproots that need to stretch, therefore they need plenty of room if you are considering a row of them in your garden. They grow best in locations with 6 to 8 hours of direct sunlight a day. Seeds should be planted about 1 inch deep and 6 inches apart in warm soil (after the last danger of frost) in nutrient rich, organic material. Multiple seeds can be planted and thinned out to the strongest plants when they are 6 inches tall. A light application of fertilizer mixed in when planting will help develop strong roots to protect them from blowing over in the wind. Be careful not to overwater sunflowers – being too wet may loosen the soil around the taproot and make the plant unstable.

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Following are some favorite varieties of sunflowers for planting:

1. Towering “Mammoth” is the traditional giant sunflower, which can grow up to 12 feet tall. Its seeds are used for snacking, and birds love them too.
2. “Autumn Beauty” is one of the most beloved varieties that has 6-inch flowers and grows to 7 feet tall. The flowers come in hues of yellow, bronze, and mahogany.
3. “Sunrich Gold” is wonderful for bouquets and flower arrangements. This sunflower grows to 5 feet tall and will produce a 4 to 6-inch flower.
4. “Teddy Bear” grows to a moderate 2 to 3-feet tall and is perfect for containers or small gardens. It produces a fluffy, 5-inch, deep gold blossom that will last for several days in a vase.

Plant some sunflowers and watch them follow the sun.
Happy Gardening!



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