

Plant sunflowers this year

Sunflowers are as much a part of summer as water balloons and corn boils. I remember planting sunflower seeds in my mother's garden and marveling as they grew as tall as Jack's beanstalk. In a favorite photo of my daughter, Kristi, a sunflower she planted towers over her four-year-old frame.

Sunflowers are easy to grow. As their name suggests, they grow best in full sun. As long as the soil is well-drained, they are not fussy about soil. Incorporate a slow release granular fertilizer deep into the soil, but be careful not to over-fertilize. Too much fertilizer may cause weak stems.

An ideal location for sunflowers is the north side of a garden where they won't cast shade on other sun-loving plants. If the spot is protected from strong winds, it is even better.

Sunflowers love heat and should not be planted in the garden until the soil is warm and the danger of frost is behind us. Seeds can be started indoors in peat pots, but it is easier to just plant them directly in the garden.

If plants are being grown ornamentally, plunge seeds an inch deep and 6 to 9 inches apart in a grouping. If they are being cultivated for seed harvesting, plant seeds in rows 2 to 3 feet apart. When the first true leaves appear, thin seedlings so they grow 18 to 24 inches apart.

If seeds are being sown for cut flowers, space them closer together. The flowers will be smaller and, without space to spread out, stems will be longer. Planting seeds every two weeks ensure a continuous supply of bouquets.

Keep the soil moist until seedlings are well on their way. Once established, their deep roots provide drought-resistance. When watering is required, deep watering is best. A layer of mulch will help the soil retain moisture longer.

As sunflowers grow, stake varieties which grow taller than 4 feet to protect them from breaking during summer storms.

Birds love sunflowers as much as gardeners. If you don't mind sharing seeds, enjoy the show as feathered friends devour tasty treats. If you have your own plans for those seeds, cover flowers with mesh bags. If deer are regular visitors to your garden, constructing barriers may be the only way to keep them from feasting.

The time to harvest seeds is signaled by nodding flower heads. The backs of flower heads also turn from green to yellowish brown. Cut the flowers with a foot or so of stem still attached. Use the stems to hang flower heads in a dry place with good air circulation until they are completely dry.

To remove seeds from flower heads, rub two flowers together or rub a stiff brush across them. Give loose seeds several days to finish drying before storing.

The best time to harvest flowers for bouquets is early in the morning. Cut flowers just before they open. Sunflowers can easily last a week in arrangements.

There are varieties of sunflowers for every garden situation. Cultivars like Teddy Bear grow 2 to 3 feet tall and are perfect for containers or small gardens. At the opposite end of the size spectrum is Mammoth. It shows off huge flowers on the tops of 12-foot stems. Super Snack Hybrid is one of the best seed producers. Vanilla Ice is a mid-size sunflower sporting soft yellow blooms. Autumn Beauty is another mid-size variety with a mixture of flowers in shades of burgundy, orange and yellow.

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