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How to Grow Sunflowers: The Complete Guide



Photo Credit: Pixabay

Botanical Name:	<i>Helianthus annuus</i>
Plant Type:	Flower
Season:	Full Sun

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Planting. Growing. and Caring

By [Catherine Boeckmann](#)**Last Updated:** April 24, 2025

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With bright blooms that go all summer, sunflowers are heat-tolerant, resistant to pests, and attractive to pollinators.

Harvest the seeds in late summer and fall for a healthy snack, or feed them to the birds! Learn how to plant, grow, and care for sunflowers.

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About Sunflowers

The sunflower (*Helianthus annuus*) is an annual plant with a sizeable daisy-like flower face. Its scientific name comes from the Greek words *helios* (“sun”) and *anthos* (“flower”). The flowers come in many colors (yellow, red, orange, maroon, brown), but they are commonly bright yellow with brown centers that ripen into

BUY SEEDS NOW

Sunflowers are heliotropic, which means that they turn their flowers to follow the movement of the Sun across the sky from east to west and then return at night to face the east, ready again for the morning sun.

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“ Here and yonder, high
and low,
Goldenrod and sun-
~ ~ ~

–Robert Kelley

Weeks (1840–76)

How Long Do Sunflowers Take to Bloom?

A reasonably fast-growing flower for its size, most sunflower varieties mature in only 70 to 95 days. The largest sunflower varieties grow to over 16 feet tall, while smaller varieties have been developed for small spaces and containers and rarely grow larger than a foot tall! The flower heads can reach over 12 inches in diameter within the large-seeded varieties.

[Learn why you should start growing these happy flowers in your garden.](#)

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Read Next

- [Make The Most Out Of Sunflowers!](#)
[What To Do With This Summer Flower](#)
- [20 Easy-to-Grow Perennial Flowers for Beginners](#)
- [How to Harvest Sunflower Seeds](#)

PLANTING

First and foremost, find a sunny spot!

Sunflowers grow best in locations with direct sunlight (6 to 8 hours per day); they require long, warm summers to flower well. Shelter from strong winds—for example, along a fence or near a building—helps as they mature. Larger varieties may become top-heavy, and a strong wind can topple them.

Choose a location with well-draining soil. The planting spot shouldn't pool with wa-

shouldn't be too compacted for the best results. They have long tap roots that need to stretch out; in preparing a bed, dig down or till 2 feet in depth and about 3 feet across. They're not too fussy when it comes to soil pH, either. Sunflowers thrive in slightly acidic to somewhat alkaline soil (pH 6.0 to 7.5).

Sunflowers are heavy feeders, so the soil needs to be nutrient-rich with organic matter or composted (aged) manure. Or, work in a slow-release granular fertilizer 8 inches deep into your soil.

Plant sunflowers in a spot sheltered from strong winds, perhaps along a fence or building. Larger varieties may become top-heavy, and a strong wind can be devastating.

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Before choosing a planting site, decide whether or not you want to grow a sun-flower tower—a fun project for kids!

When to Plant Sunflowers

- It's best to sow sunflower seeds directly into the garden (or outdoor containers) after the danger of spring frost has passed, anytime after soils have warmed to at least 50°F (10°C).
- In the northern half of the U.S. and in Canada, this will fall between April and mid-June. In the South, this will probably occur in mid-March or early April.
- Sunflowers dislike having their roots disturbed, so we recommend direct sowing instead of transplanting.



Planting Sunflower Seeds

- Sunflowers should be planted 1 to 1½ inches deep and about 6 inches apart after the soil has thoroughly warmed. If you wish, you can plant multiple seeds and thin them to the strongest contenders when the plants are six inches tall.
- Give plants plenty of room, especially for low-growing varieties that will branch out. Make rows about 30 inches apart. (For very small varieties, plant closer together.)
- A light application of fertilizer mixed in at planting time will encourage strong root growth to protect them from blowing over in the wind.
- Experiment with plantings staggered over 5 to 6 weeks to keep enjoying continuous blooms.
- If you see birds scratching around for the seeds, spread netting over the planted area until the seeds germinate. See more ways to [keep birds away from your garden](#).

...w to Grow The Tallest Sunflowers



GROWING

- While the plant is small, water around the roots, about 3 to 4 inches from the plant. To protect the plant, it may help to put snail or slug bait around the stem.
- Once the plant is established, water deeply, though infrequently, to encourage deep rooting. Unless the weather is exceptionally wet or dry, water once a week with several gallons of water.
- Feed plants only sparingly; overfertilization can cause stems to break in the fall. You can add diluted fertilizer into the water, though avoid getting the fertilizer near the plant's base; it may help to build a moat in a circle around the plant about 18 inches out.

for any plant that has a strong, single stem and needs support for a short period of time.



Photo Credit: Chris Burnett

Types

There are tons of varieties of sunflowers available today, so there's bound to be one that fits your garden. Choose between those with branching stems or single stems, those that produce ample pollen for pollinators or are pollen-free (best for bouquets), those that stay small or tower above the rest of the garden, or those that produce edible seeds!

Everyone is familiar with those huge sunflowers that grow on towering eight-foot-tall stalks. But did you know some varieties top off at a modest 15 inches?

- The towering '**Mammoth**' variety is the traditional giant sunflower, sometimes growing to over 12 feet tall. Its seeds are excellent for snacks and for feeding the birds, too.
- '**Autumn Beauty**': One of the most spectacular cultivars, the 'Autumn Beauty' has many 6-inch flowers in shades of yellow, bronze, and mahogany on branching stems up to 7 feet tall.
- '**Sunrich Gold**': An excellent flower for bouquets and arrangements, this sunflower grows to be about 5 feet tall and produces a single 4- to 6-inch flower. The big, no-mess, pollenless flowers have rich, golden-yellow rays and green-yellow centers. This variety is wonderful for arrangements.
- '**Teddy Bear**': Just 2 to 3 feet tall, this small sunflower is perfect for small gardens and containers. The fluffy, deep-gold, 5-inch blossoms on branching stems last for days in a vase.

HARVESTING

Cutting Sunflowers for Bouquets

- For indoor bouquets, cut the main stem just before its flower bud has a chance to open to encourage side blooms.
- Cut stems early in the morning. Harvesting flowers during the middle of the day may lead to flower wilting.
- Strip stems of all leaves except for those closest to the flower head. Recut bottoms of stems at a 45-degree angle.
- Handle sunflowers gently. The flowers should last at least a week in water at room temperature.
- Arrange sunflowers in tall containers that provide good support for their heavy heads, and change the water every day to keep them fresh.



At the end of the season, harvest sunflower seeds for a tasty snack and or to replant or to feed the birds in the winter!

- Let the flower dry on or off the stem until the back of the head turns brown, the foliage turns yellow, the petals die down, and the seeds look plump and somewhat loose.
- With sharp scissors or pruners, cut the head off the plant (about 6 inches below the flower head). Place in a container to catch loose seeds.
- Lie the sunflower head on a flat, clean surface and grab a bowl to hold the seeds.
- To remove the seeds, rub your hand over the seeded area and pull them off the plant or you can use a fork. Another way to remove them is to rub the head of the sunflower across an old washboard or something similar. Just grip the head and rub it across the board as if you were washing clothes.
- If you are going to harvest the seeds

cloth) and a rubber band to protect the heads from the birds.

- Alternatively, you can cut the flower head early and hang the heads upside down until the seeds are dry; hang indoors or in a place that's safe from birds and mice.
- Rinse sunflower seeds before laying out to dry for several hours or overnight.
- If you're saving seeds to replant, store them in an airtight container in a cool, dry place until you are ready to plant.

[Read our complete article on harvesting sunflower seeds here.](#)

WIT AND WISDOM

- Some people call sunflowers the “fourth sister,” in reference to the [Three Sisters](#): corn, beans, and squash.
- Some cultures see sunflowers as a symbol of courage.
- Sunflowers were not only used for cooking by Native Americans but also

petals and black or blue dye from the seeds).

- Need a bird feeder? Save whole, dry sunflower heads and set them out in winter. Birds will gladly pick at the delicious seeds!
- Save thick sunflower stems and dry them for winter kindling.
- An anonymous buyer paid over \$39 million in 1987 for Vincent van Gogh's *Sunflowers*.
- The tallest sunflower ever recorded was grown in Germany in 2014. It measured in at a stunning 30 feet and 1 inch tall!
- Kansas is "The Sunflower State."

PESTS/DISEASES

- Birds and squirrels will show interest in the seeds. If you plan to use the seeds, deter critters with barrier devices. As seed heads mature and flowers droop, you can cover each one with white polypun garden fleece.
- If you have deer, keep them at bay

- Sunflowers are relatively insect-free. A small gray moth, known as sunflower moth, sometimes lays its eggs in the blossoms. Pick the worms from the plants.
- Downy mildew, rust, fungal leaf spot, **Sclerotinia mold**, and powdery mildew can also affect the plants. If fungal diseases are spotted early, spray with a general garden fungicide.
- Other diseases that occasionally affect sunflowers include **Phoma black stem**, **Botrytis blight**, **viruses**, and **Verticillium wilt**.

RECIPES

GRANOLA WITH SUNFLOWER SEEDS

COOKING NOTES

Just one ounce of sunflower seeds contains about 6 grams of protein and 14 grams of oil. The fats are almost entirely

ounce (NSA). The oil is high in linoleic acid and is a good source of vitamin E.

- Some varieties produce small black seeds used in cooking oil, margarine, cosmetics, and animal feed; they are the best sunflower seeds for attracting the greatest variety of songbirds.
- The bigger, striped seeds are grown for snacking and as an ingredient in bread and health foods. They, too, are used for feeding birds, especially larger species, such as jays and mourning doves.

How to Roast Sunflower Seeds

Re-soak seeds overnight in salted water. Run through a strainer and dry on a layer of paper towels.

Bake for 25 to 30 minutes at 325 degrees on a baking sheet. Seeds should be spread out in a single layer. Stir frequently during the baking and remove seeds when they look slightly browned. Don't burn!

you wish.

Or, you can also make suet cakes for the winter birds! [See how to make suet.](#)

FLOWERS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Catherine Boeckmann



Catherine Boeckmann loves nature, stargazing, and gardening so it's not surprising that she and The Old Farmer's Almanac found each other. She leads digital content for the Almanac website, and is also a certified master gardener in the state of Indiana. [Read More from Catherine Boeckmann](#)

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COMMENTS

ADD A COMMENT

Duk's Godfrey (not verified) 6 months ago

Can sunflower seeds be planted together with
farterlize if yes then which type and does sun-
flower be spread using pesticide

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REPLY

Anne (not verified) 1 month 1 week ago

yeah just get a few cows around they
will do the trick~ pesticides not
needs harmful to bees~

REPLY

Barbara (not verified) 7 months 3 weeks ago

We have a sunflower growing in our garden
that must have come from a seed that was

[REPLY](#)

kmelitz (not verified) 9 months 3 weeks ago

Does anyone have issue with big black ants the sunflowers? I have tried everything lots ot get them off but they do not seem to go anywhere . Any ideas ?

[REPLY](#)

The Editors 9 months 3 weeks ago

The ants are there because of pests called aphids. The ants are attracted to the aphids' sweet nectar and "farming" them. If you spray water to dislodge aphids, the ants will also go away.

[REPLY](#)

David Imanuh (not verified) 10 months 1 week ago

REPLY

Semachiah (not verified) 1 year 11 months ago

Sunflowers can't be too picky! Our birds plant them every year & we always have a strong bed of them the next.

REPLY

Mel (not verified) 2 years 1 month ago

Does anyone have recommendations on best sunflower seed brands?

REPLY

Dr Eric Aschendorf (not verified)

10 months ago

That depends upon you! What are you looking for? I plant mostly for the birds, so I buy bags of the White Stripped Bird Seed, Sunflower seeds & simply scatter them into the bed,

which were "nice," but really it didn't make a big difference to me when all was said & done so back I went to the Bird Seed.

REPLY

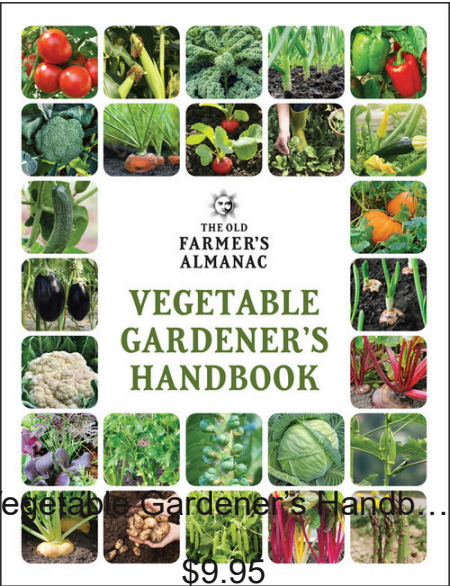
The Editors 2 years 1 month ago

Hi, Mel. You really can't go wrong with Johnny's Selected Seeds, Eden Brothers, Burpee, or Gurney's. You can also check garden centers in your area—we bet the seeds are out!

REPLY

MORE COMMENTS

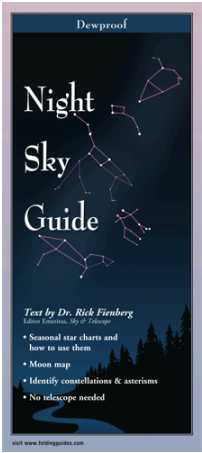
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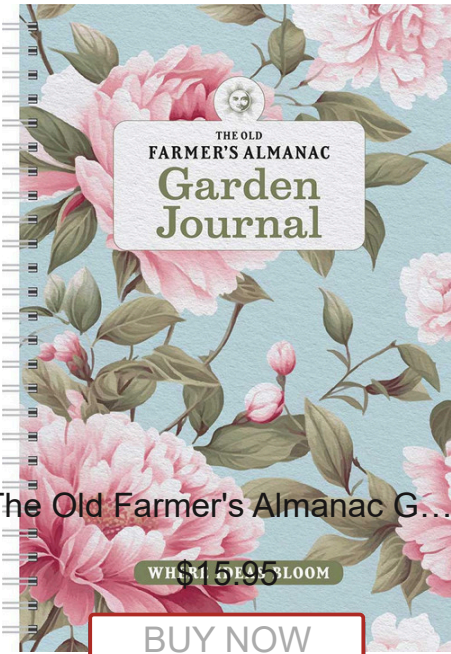
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