



# GROWING SUNFLOWERS

*Sunflowers are an easy to grow annual adding a cheerful splash of colour to your growing space. The scientific name Helianthus translates from Greek Helios meaning sun and Anthos meaning flower; the seeds are a good source of protein and healthy fat, some varieties are better for eating, some are better for the birds.*

## Seed Sowing

Sunflowers are annuals that can be sown in modules from March to June at a depth of 2 cm. Alternatively, you can sow outdoors in rows 40 cm apart from May to June, protecting earlier sown seeds with fleece if there is a risk of frost.

## Transplanting

Ensure your seedbed is free from weeds. Sheltered sunny sites are best, as sunflowers don't like strong winds or shade. They prefer moist but free-draining soils, so incorporating organic matter is beneficial. Large varieties will need more space than smaller ones, so bear that in mind when spacing in your rows. Young plants need hardening off before planting.

## Plant Care

Keep the area weed-free and watered during hot spells. You can mulch around the plants to keep in moisture and prevent weeds. Stems will need support, especially in windy growing conditions.

## Challenges

Generally pest and disease-free, young seedlings will need protection from slugs. If they are hardened off well, they are less susceptible to attack. Sunflowers do not like cold weather, so if you are in a colder area, sow later for best results. If you want to harvest the seeds, cover them with a net to stop the birds from eating them (maybe leave a few uncovered for the birds too).

## Harvest

Pick the flower heads for cut flowers when the blooms are half open. Ideally harvest the flowers in the morning when temperatures are low and plant water content is high. Plants will arrange better if left to sit in water for a few hours after cutting.

When they start to droop, they are forming seeds. If you're growing for wildlife benefits, just enjoy them where they are and let them set seed for the finches; the stems are good overwintering spots for beneficial insects.

## Culinary Ideas And Uses

Sunflower seeds for eating are generally grown in large quantities and shelled by machine, as doing it by hand is very time-consuming. Choose a variety with large flowers and large seeds to make it worth the effort. You can roast them in the shell and crack and nibble your way through them.

Use the petals to decorate salads and cakes.

## Seed Saving

Once the seed heads have drooped and turned brown, you can collect the whole heads to dry indoors for at least another week. Rub the seeds away from the seed head; the central ones are usually the largest and best quality. You can separate seeds from chaff before storing in a cool dark place; seeds should remain viable for around 2 years.