



I N T H E G A R D E N

THE MULTI-TALENTED SUNFLOWER

BY DONNA WILLIAMSON

EVERYTHING ABOUT SUNFLOWERS IS GENEROUS AND BOUNTIFUL!

The sunflower, the quintessential symbol of summer, is gaining new audiences with exciting new varieties. Easy to grow, this beautiful, strong plant with exuberant flowers provides high-quality nutrition to humans and animals alike and is a source of healthy oil—everything about sunflowers is generous and bountiful! You can even grow several varieties and wholesale the cut flowers at a local farmer's market.

The sunflowers we see at county fairs, impossibly tall with huge seed heads, are only one form of this large family of aster relatives. These are annual plants, *Helianthus annuus*, the ones that go from seed to flower, produce new seeds, and then die. There are also perennial sunflowers like *Helianthus angustifolius* and *H.*

salicifolius that come back bigger and better each year. But those are for another day. For now, let's consider the annual types.

Domesticated in the U.S., America's native peoples cultivated sunflowers in New Mexico and Arizona around 3000 B.C. Their seeds were ground into flour, the meal was mixed with vegetables, and the oil was used in bread-making. There were many non-food uses as well, such as dyes and body ointments and building materials and medicines. Spanish explorers took the plant to Europe in the 1500s. There it was widely grown and used as an ornamental and a medicine source. Its seeds produced a very light cooking oil.

Popular in the 1700s, sunflowers became a major commercial crop in Russia. In the mid-1800s sunflowers grown for high qual-



AN ENORMOUS HEAD AND EDIBLE SEEDS MAKE THE TARAHUMARA VARIETY A TRADITIONAL FAVORITE.



TIGER'S EYE FEATURES INTRIGUING MULTI-COLORED FLOWERS, 6 TO 8 FEET IN HEIGHT.

ity oil became a major crop that was hybridized to increase oil production, and yields increased significantly.

In the late 1800s, the newer Russian seeds came back to the U.S. and are sold today as "Russian Mammoth." While first grown as silage for poultry, by 1926 they were grown for their high quality oil. By the 1970s, when the concern over cholesterol became widespread, the healthy sunflower oil became much more popular. It is still very popular in Europe.

Ornamental use of sunflowers is of more interest to the home gardener. Seed catalogs show beautiful photos of red, white, yellow, orange, multi-colored, and fuzzy sunflowers to grow in your garden. Plant them with abandon. Once the pollinated flower heads form seeds and mature by turning brown on the back of the seed head, cut the heads and put them in a shaded area, sheltered from rain, to dry. Store in paper bags for winter. On a snowy day in winter, the birds will be grateful for your gift of a huge sunflower head full of oil-rich seeds to keep them toasty in the chill winds.

While sunflowers are easy to grow, it's best to wait until the soil warms in the spring to start

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THE EVENING SUN PRODUCES A VELVETY MAROON BLOSSOM.

planting. Chilly, wet spring soils can lead to rotting of seeds planted too early, and the same plants will pop out of the ground in about a week when the soil warms to 65 to 70 degrees. May is an excellent time to plant sunflowers. Maze builders have found that waiting until July to plant sunflowers leaves them at only five-feet rather than the taller growth possible when planted earlier in the season. This is an issue of the plants' response to shortened day length. So, plant in May for the tall ones, and in July for the shorter versions. Watch for weed competition the first month or so after the seedlings emerge; after that they will out-distance most weeds.

Look on the package to find the size of the mature plant. Some grow eight to 12 feet tall; others, only two feet tall. As you might expect, sunflowers love the sun; at least six hours is minimum for good flowering. If you make your rows heading north to south and at least three feet apart, the plants will receive sun from morning to evening without shading each other. Plant seeds far enough apart to account for their eventual size without wasting space in between. Try to group similar sizes together for ease of planting and harvesting.

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Sunflowers easily thrive in most good-draining, fertile soils—they can even absorb and collect toxins from the soil. But don't overfeed them. Too much nitrogen fertilizer will result in weak stems, lush leaves, and fewer flowers. Sunflowers develop deep roots with broad spread to support their substantial growth. While drought tolerant for most of their lives, they need decent watering from 20 days before to 20 days after flowering. You will see the tiny flower buds forming. These buds will follow the sun throughout the day. Once the flower opens, it will face in a northerly or easterly direction to avoid searing southern and western sunlight. If rain is not adequate, supplemental watering at the rate of one inch per week is recommended.

Sunflowers make great cut flowers and are always cheery in summer bouquets. By themselves in a big old tomato sauce can, in a banged-up watering can, or in a lovely ceramic vase, these flowers bring smiles.

Founder and editor of GRANDIFLORA MidAtlantic Gardening magazine, Donna Williamson teaches gardening and design classes in Waterford, Warrenton and Winchester. Photographs courtesy of Seeds of Change.



RUSSIAN MAMMOTH GROWS 9 TO 12 FEET TALL.

