



sunflower power

by Michelle Leise

These joyful gems bring happiness wherever they bloom. Now with varied hues and heights, they can perk up any garden.

The annual sunflower (*Helianthus annuus* and related species), with its cheerful disposition, triggers smiles all around. But sunflowers aren't just the yellow giants they used to be. Today's hybrids offer smaller plants for pots; medium-sized specimens in white, red, or orange; and mammoths that soar even higher than their predecessors.

No matter which type of sunflower you choose for your garden, these cheery annuals are easy to grow. They also make great cut flowers, offer delicious seeds, and lure bees, birds, and butterflies. All you need to start them are seeds and sunshine—and a few tips.

From giants to dwarfs

The single-stemmed sunflowers of yesteryear bolted for the sky, using all their energy to produce one awe-inspiring bloom. The century-old, 7-foot-tall *Helianthus annuus* 'Mammoth Russian' is still a favorite, but bigger versions are also available. 'American Giant' and 'Sunzilla' each grow up to 16 feet tall. 'Titan' is a 10- to 12-foot-tall shocker that produces flower heads up to 2 feet across.



Not all sunflowers are giants; dwarf varieties like 'Pacino' and 'Sunny Smile' are equally at home in a sunny perennial border or a vase indoors.

If you want a sunflower that blends in a little better with other garden specimens, look to the 4- to 6-foot-tall branching varieties. These beauties offer numerous (though smaller) blooms, and they're available in a range of colors, including tried-and-true yellow. 'Velvet Queen' and early-blooming 'Prado Red' are deep, dark red.

Dwarf varieties are an exciting breakthrough. Some, like 'Solita' and 'Dwarf Sunspot', stay less than 2 feet tall but offer blooms 5 to 10 inches across. Others, like the fun 'Sungold' (which has dense, extra double, 8-inch blooms), grow 2 to 3 feet tall. Dwarf sunflowers are perfect for containers, with one caveat: Most of them tilt their heads toward the ground, just like their taller siblings, so you'll be looking down at the back of the flower heads. The exception is the brand new 2010 introduction 'Miss Sunshine', which peers upward, growing 10 to 16 inches tall with multiple blooms.

12 sunny favorites

Annual sunflowers (*Helianthus annuus*) come in a dizzying range of colors and sizes. Here are some fun varieties to try:

Dwarf sunflowers

'**Dwarf Sunspot**' is a branching variety that produces multiple 10-inch flower heads. Grows 18 inches tall.

'**Miss Sunshine**' has golden, upward-facing flowers. Grows 10 to 16 inches tall.

'**Solita**' has bold 6-inch flower heads. Great for pots. Grows 12 to 16 inches tall.

'**Sunny Smile**' stays 6 to 8 inches tall with a single 5-inch bloom in containers. In the garden, it grows 15 to 20 inches tall, branching into four or five blossoms.

Sunflowers with unique colors and textures

'**Chianti**' is a branching variety with rich wine-colored petals and 3- to 4-inch flower heads. Grows 4 to 5 feet tall.

'**Moulin Rouge**' is a branching variety with deep red petals, an almost black center, and 4- to 5-inch flower heads. Grows 6 feet tall.

'**Teddy Bear**' resembles a soft, yellow, fuzzy pompon—great for children's gardens. Grows 2 to 3 feet tall.

'**Vanilla Ice**' provides florist-quality blossoms for cut-flower arrangements. Four-inch flowers of ivory petals surround a deep brown eye. Grows 4 to 7 feet tall.

'**Zebulon**' has a bold geometric pattern on its chartreuse center. A nice cut flower with a single stem. Grows 2 to 3 feet tall.

Extra-large sunflowers

'**American Giant**' and '**Sunzilla**' have 10- to 12-inch flowers. Both grow 16 feet tall.

'**Kong**' is a branching variety with flower heads 5 to 6 inches in diameter. Grows 10 to 14 feet tall.

'**Titan**' produces one of the largest flower heads and bountiful seeds. Yellow blooms are 18 to 24 inches across. Grows 10 to 12 feet tall.



Go pollen-free

Some sunflowers are pollenless, either naturally or through hybridization. These varieties don't shed pollen, which easily stains clothing and table linens, so they're perfect for centerpieces and indoor bouquets. They also don't aggravate allergies.

Don't worry about the bees and butterflies—pollenless flowers still have plenty of nectar, which is what these insects are seeking. And if you plant these varieties with sunflowers that do have pollen, the blooms will still produce lots of seeds. (Remember that if you sow the seeds next season, the sunflowers will exhibit different traits than the original plant.) Try varieties such as the pale-centered, fully double 'Starburst Lemon Aura', maroon 'Chianti', or triple-hued 'Strawberry Blonde'.

Where to plant

Sunflowers need six to eight hours of sunlight daily and plenty of space to spread their wide roots. Though many varieties tolerate average to poor soil, tall species may blow over in sandy spots, so plant these types in firm, stable ground. Pay attention to direction, too. When most sunflowers are growing, their flower buds follow the sun (a trait called heliotropism). But once their buds open, sunflowers keep their faces pointed toward the east. Plant accordingly, so you don't end up looking at the back sides of your beauties once they blossom.

How to plant

As soon as night temperatures stay above 50°F, sow sunflower seeds directly into the ground. Plant two to four seeds in each hole. (Squirrels and birds love these morsels, so cover the seeds with a screen until they sprout.) Space according to the packet's directions—branching varieties, especially, take up a lot of space.

Sunflowers need plenty of nutrients,



Above: Make a simple, elegant late-summer arrangement by combining red sunflower cultivars like 'Velvet Queen' with Queen Anne's lace and foxtails. **Right:** Pale yellow 'Vanilla Ice' is another star in cut-flower arrangements.

so mix compost or other organic material into the soil before planting, then add a balanced slow-release fertilizer. (A good organic option is fish emulsion.) Water daily. If you're striving for extra-big blooms, add phosphorus and potassium when the flower buds emerge.

How to cut for bouquets

To get the most success from sunflowers in bouquets, cut when a couple of petals are lifting off the blossom's center. Blooms cut at their peak last about one week in a vase, whereas flower heads cut early last almost two. Pollenless varieties are the best choices, because you won't have to worry about pollen stains. The Sunrich series, early-blooming Pro Cut series, and 'Taiyo' have been bred specifically for cut-flower arrangements, with sturdy, straight stems and long-lasting blooms.

For pretty late-summer and fall arrangements, mix sunflowers with zinnias, Russian sage, or dahlias. Combine with spikes of feather reed grass or maiden grass. Arrange with large hosta leaves or blend with sunflowers of different hues.



what about the stalks?

You've grown sunflowers that seem to touch the sky. Now you have to figure out what to do with the stalks after the growing season. Here are some ideas:

- Shred them for mulch.
- Break them down and add them to the compost pile.
- Strip the leaves, dry the stalks, and burn them. Then spread a small amount of the resulting ash—which is high in potash—where you'll be growing potatoes or other root crops next season.



To remove seeds from a sunflower, wait until the head has shriveled and most of the petals have fallen.

How to harvest the seeds

A quarter cup of sunflower seeds contains 90 percent of the recommended daily intake of vitamin E, so this is a nutritious and tasty treat. If the weather is dry, let nature do the work. When the back of the flower head is brown, the head has shriveled, and most of the petals have fallen, the seeds should be dry and ripe. Cut off the heads, turn them upside down, and shake the dried seeds onto a newspaper or basket, giving each head a few light taps with a mallet or rubbing them over wire mesh if necessary. (Put a bag over the head before tapping for easy collection.) Store the seeds in a sealed container in a cool, dry place until you plant next year, or roast them in the oven for snacking.

If late fall turns wet and cold, do the drying yourself. Cut the stalks off a few inches from the top and hang the seed heads indoors in a dry, well-ventilated location. After the heads begin to wither, cut off the stalks and



position the heads on oven shelves with the oven set at the lowest temperature and the door open. When the heads are dry, tap the seeds out. If the seeds are hard to remove, whether dried indoors or out, they're not yet ready to be harvested.

'Sunseed', 'Titan', and 'Mammoth Russian' have especially abundant, meaty seeds. If birds or squirrels start getting to your seeds before the plant is ready to be cut, cover the sunflower head with a nylon stocking, onion bag, cheesecloth, or other material that lets air circulate. 🌿

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For sunflower seed sources, see Resource Guide on page 47.



For more sunflower varieties and tips on roasting sunflower seeds, visit www.gardeningclub.com and click on WebExtra.

Sunflowers make a great addition to your autumn décor—just snip a few flowers, put them in a vase, and combine them with traditional fall decorations like gourds and pumpkins.