

Sunflower

Grown for their bright yellow flowers and tasty, nutritious seeds, sunflowers are everyone's favorite. Fun to grow, they're great for the kids' garden. Their seeds also make feed for poultry and wild birds, including cardinals and finches. .

Varieties

Several large-flowered varieties are now available, including Black Striped Russian, 'Gray Striped Russian,' and 'Mammoth.' .

Planting

Plant sunflowers, a warm-weather crop, after all danger of frost passes. Pick a site with full sun and a rich, well-drained soil. Prepare the bed by loosening it with a spade and adding peat, compost, or manure. Sow seeds about 1 inch deep and about 1 foot apart. Plant sunflowers on the north side of the garden since they will grow tall and shade other plants. Plant shade-tolerant vegetables such as lettuce, spinach, and Swiss chard nearby.

Care

Once the plants are up and growing, mulch to keep weed competition to a minimum. Keep the plants well watered and fertilized. Thin the plants if their growth is retarded.

Harvest

Allow the seeds to mature on the plant before harvesting. Keep birds from getting to the seed-bearing flowers by covering them with nylon netting or cheesecloth. When seeds have turned color and pop easily off the heads, cut the heads off with a sharp knife. On particularly large stalks, you may have to use a hatchet. Hang the heads in a warm, dry area with good ventilation to let the seeds cure. When the seeds are fully dry, rub your thumb across them to pop them off the heads. Store dried seeds in airtight glass jars, keeping the humidity low to prevent mold. Storing in the refrigerator works well.

