

Gardening 101

Sunflowers

Think of this happy flower as sunshine on a stem—it's guaranteed to brighten your day.

BY GENE B. BUSSELL

There's a reason Vincent van Gogh painted sunflowers—they are simply joyful. Surround yourself with these happy blooms and you'll smile every time you see them.

Sunflowers make great, long-lasting bouquets for your table, but don't cut them all. Leave enough flowers in your garden to enjoy the big show all summer. As you might have guessed, they love sunshine and need at least six hours of it a day. They're also tolerant of imperfect soil conditions. Once the flowers mature, beautiful birds will come in flocks in early morning and late afternoon. Goldfinches like to perch on the tops of large sunflowers and eat the seeds one by one—sort of like a bird buffet.

Jones Valley Urban Farm (jvuf.org) in Birmingham grows thousands of sunflowers each year for the local Whole Foods Market. "Sunflowers are what I think of when I want guaranteed success and instant beauty," says Jones Valley Executive Director Edwin Marty. "They're very forgiving, especially for the novice gardener."

You'll find sunflower selections in many colors and sizes. Blooms aren't all yellow but can be red, chocolate, peach, lemon, or burgundy. You can even buy multicolored selections. For wow factor—and big bang for your buck—try giant sunflowers such as the newer 'Sunzilla' (up to 16 feet tall) or the classic big boy 'Mammoth Russian' (10 to 12



'Mammoth Russian' sunflowers grow big and have very large flowers.

feet tall), a favorite among goldfinches and other birds. If you don't have much space, try dwarf types such as 'Big Smile,' 'Junior,' and 'Firecracker' (all around 2 feet tall). These take up so little room that you can even grow them in pots.

Large or small, indoors or out, sunflowers just say summertime. So go ahead and sow a little summer in your garden today.

Edwin's Clip Tips

Use sharp clippers or snips to cut stems early in the morning, before it's too hot. Be sure to cut flowers that are almost fully open. They'll last longer in a vase. Clip (don't pull) to remove any leaves that would be in water once you make your arrangement. Pollenless types such as the Pro Cut selections have a longer vase life (and don't shed).

Three Ways To Grow Sunflowers



METHOD 1 Sow directly into the garden.

When the soil has warmed, plant seeds in batches a few weeks apart, so you'll have new blooms as others fade. (Seed packets

have instructions on spacing seeds and thinning seedlings.) Thin seedlings once they begin popping up. Use netting to protect newly sown areas from birds.



METHOD 2 Start in Jiffy Pellets.

Set compressed pellets in a tray of shallow water to expand them. Then add a seed to each pellet. Once seeds germinate,

plant them in your garden, pellet and all. Pellets offer protection as the seeds germinate, allow for proper spacing, and make it easier to stagger your plantings.



METHOD 3 Begin in peat pots.

Fill the pots with lightweight potting soil designed for growing seedlings. Use a watering can to wet both the pots and

the soil. Add a sunflower seed to each. Keep the pots and soil moist. Once the seeds germinate, plant the entire pots in your garden. *

SUNFLOWER SOURCES

Johnny's Selected Seeds: johnnyseeds.com

Renee's Garden: reneesgarden.com

Wildseed Farms: wildseedfarms.com

Botanical Interests: botanicalinterests.com

Our Favorites

There are lots of sunflowers to choose from. Here are some you must try.



'PRO CUT RED/LEMON BICOLOR'

Burgundy center with light yellow petal tips. Single-stalked plant; 5 to 6 feet tall. Pollenless, long-lasting cut flowers.



'PRO CUT ORANGE'

Brown center and yellow-orange petals. Single-stalked plant; 5 to 6 feet tall. Pollenless, long-lasting cut flowers.



'THE JOKER'

Mahogany and light yellow petals. Branching plant with multiple blooms; 5 to 6 feet tall.



'MOULIN ROUGE'

Editors' favorite. Gorgeous, chocolate-colored flowers. Branching plant with multiple blooms; 4 to 5 feet tall.



'RING OF FIRE'

Brown center and bright red-and-golden yellow petals. Branching plant with multiple blooms; 4 to 5 feet tall.



'MAYA'

Golden yellow flowers. Branching plant with multiple blooms; 4 to 6 feet tall. Goldfinches love the seeds.