

Knee Deep in Ordinary

By Julie Silva

We are knee deep in ordinary. Ordinary annuals surround us in every garden store and scattered along the flowerbeds in America's subdivisions. It is time to address the superstar elephant in the room. It is time to admire the toughest, tastiest, prettiest, heliotropic native flower grown here.

These North American natives love the heat, fight off pest like Superman, have a siren song to butterflies and birds, and finish with delicious seeds. Sunflowers touch the red palette moving from yellow to orange to red to mahogany. Size varies from the wild varieties with small flowers to mammoth flowers the size of dinner plates. Easy to grow and fun to watch as the flowers earn the name heliotropic by turning their heads to follow the movement of the sun.

Sunflowers are all about summer. They prefer direct sunlight and loose, well-draining soil. They are heavy feeders so add organic material or compost to the hole. Larger varieties have a deep tap root for support so loosen your soil to the depth of a couple of feet, especially if you are creating a sunflower tower or a child's sunflower tent. The soil should drain well to keep the sunflower from having wet, waterlogged roots.

The best way to start sunflowers is from seed directly into the ground. Plant the seeds one inch deep and about six inches apart. Watch your birds to make sure they are not following after you and eating the seeds you just planted. When the plants reach a height of six inches tall you may thin them out, leaving the strongest ones growing. Be prepared to provide support to the larger varieties, especially the ones with dinner plate flowers filled with seeds.

Plants may need some protection from snails or slugs when young. Just as we are attracted to the flowers and seeds so are others: squirrels, birds, and deer. The usual protection will keep them at bay, allowing the flowers to gain size and be dried for winter feed. Covering the drooping flower heads with cheesecloth type fabric should save the seeds, making sure to zip tie the fabric around the stem. Harvest occurs 30 to 45 days after bloom. The back of the flower will change from green to yellow to brown. When the back is brown, cut the flower head off about four inches below the flower. Hang to dry away from birds, squirrels, mice, or deer.

You may dry the heads then put them out in the winter intact, just like a natural bird feeder. To quickly remove the seeds, rub the dried seed head across an old washboard. Just like washing clothes! Bet you thought those washboards were just for display. Remember, any plant that provides production like nuts or fruit needs fertilizer to provide the best results.

Sunflower seeds are an important crop throughout the world. Sunflower seeds provide oil crops and food for many. One ounce of seeds contains six grams of protein and a whopping 14 grams of oil. The small black seeds are used for margarine, cosmetics, and cooking oil. The black

seeds are the favorite of songbirds; they know something good when they taste it. The big gray stripped seeds are used for breads, snacks, and health foods. Larger birds prefer the bigger seeds.

Cooking seeds for your family's treats are simple. The seeds must dry on the plant then grab your washboard. Rub off the seeds from the seed head, sort through them for bad seeds and remove, and then soak overnight in one gallon of water that has been mixed with one cup of salt. Remove from the water and finish drying them in an oven set at 250 degrees for 4 or 5 hours.

Sunflowers have existed in the US since 3000 B.C., cultivated by American Indians. The seeds were made into flour, oil, snacks, and medicine. They were also used for ceremonies, probably because of the heliotropism - the flower magically turning to follow the sun. Hundreds of years of growing sunflowers demonstrate they are truly a super plant, perfect for many uses. Planting sunflowers in your yard will make you home amazing and super too!

Julie Silva is a University of California Cooperative Extension Master Gardener of Tuolumne County.

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