



Garden Notes

GN 166

HOW TO GROW SUNFLOWERS

Helianthus annuus, the common sunflower, is native across North America. There are many reasons to grow sunflowers--they are beautiful and make cheerful fresh-cut flowers, are easy to grow, drought tolerant, fun for kids, attract bees and birds, they condition the soil, and the seeds are a nutritious snack.

SUNFLOWERS ARE EASY TO GROW

- Plant in full sun, at least 6 hours a day.
- Any kind of soil is fine as long as it is not waterlogged.
- Best to plant directly in the ground after all danger of spring frost.
- Follow directions on the seed packet for spacing.
- Keep soil moist until seeds sprout in approximately 11 days.
- Plant more seeds every 2 to 3 weeks to enjoy continuous bloom.
- Sunflower plants emit substances that inhibit the growth of certain other plants. Separate them from potatoes and pole beans.
- When the plant is established, water deeply though infrequently to encourage deep rooting. Unless the weather is exceptionally wet or dry, water once a week with several gallons of water.
- If you have good soil, sunflowers do not require fertilizing.
- When plants are growing well, apply a 2 to 3 inch mulch layer--keep it away from the stems.
- Stake sunflowers that grow over 3 feet tall or are multi-branched.
- Sunflowers will mature and develop seeds in 80 to 120 days.

SUNFLOWERS USUALLY HAVE VERY FEW PROBLEMS

They are sometimes infected with fungal diseases such as downy mildew or rust.

A small gray sunflower moth sometimes lays its eggs in developing sunflower blossoms.

Go to the UC Statewide Integrated Pest Management website for more information--ipm.ucanr.edu

HARVESTING SUNFLOWERS

Cut sunflowers should be harvested in the morning; if you wait until afternoon, they may wilt.

SEED HARVEST TIPS

- In early fall check for signs of maturity. The reverse side turns from green to yellow then brown. Large heads nod downward, tiny petals covering developing seeds are dry and fall out easily, exposing tightly-packed mature seeds.
- To protect the seeds from predators, cover the flower heads with a paper bag or cloth.
- Cut off seed heads with a foot or more of stem attached; hang in a warm, dry, well-ventilated place.
- Let them cure for several weeks, then dislodge the seeds and allow them to dry for 1-2 months.
- Store in airtight glass jars in the refrigerator.
- Or cut the seed heads off and hang them outside, or simply place them on the ground and enjoy watching the squirrels and birds harvest the seeds.

A good resource is the National Sunflower Association, sunflowernsa.com

June 2017, written by Roxie Jones, UCCE Sacramento County Master Gardener. Reviewed by Judy McClure, UCCE Sacramento County Master Gardener Program Coordinator.