



What to know about Sunflowers

The sunflower (*Helianthus annuus*) is a species of one of the largest plant families, Asteraceae. Sunflowers are native to North America and were first cultivated by indigenous people in the Southwest, dating back around 3000 BC. The seeds were collected and ground into flour, eaten as snacks and used for dyes and medicine. The oil from the seeds was used for cooking, skincare and hair care. Sunflowers were introduced from North America to Europe by Spanish explorers around 1500. They became popular in Russia in the 18th century for their usefulness and beauty.

When to plant: Sunflowers should be planted in the spring after the danger of frost has passed (~3 weeks after last frost). Probably plant in early May in Josephine County; need night temps to be 60-70 degrees; plant ~1" deep. They can be grown indoors from seeds but sowing directly in the ground is better --ed. note by PBM).

If you want the biggest and most productive sunflowers, amend your soil with compost or aged manure before sowing the seeds. Sunflowers grow best when they receive about 1 inch of water per week. While some varieties are bred to be smaller, sunflowers can grow quite tall, reaching heights of 12 feet or more. Sunflowers can be top-heavy plants, and tall varieties are particularly vulnerable to wind damage. Staking sunflowers over 3 feet tall is a good way to prevent them from toppling over in bad weather.

Young sunflowers exhibit heliotropism, meaning they move to face the sun as it moves across the sky from east to west, maximizing sunlight absorption for photosynthesis. The name of this bloom is no coincidence: sunflowers truly need sunlight to thrive. Sunflowers should receive at least 6-8 hours of sunlight a day, but even more time soaking up the rays is ideal. Once the buds open into flowers, their stems stiffen and remain in place, with the flowers facing east all day long.

(By Chris Rusch, Master Gardener, Douglas County, Published in the News-Review April 25, 2025)

Water needs: Although sunflowers can be tolerant of sun and dry conditions they do love to be watered regularly after sowing and probably once a week, at least, during the growing season, especially if very hot.

Fertilize? Yes, a balanced fertilizer (10-10-10) is not required but is suggested throughout the summer every few weeks

Plant new seeds every 2-3 weeks to get a continuous crop throughout the summer until fall. The smaller varieties can be grown in large pots as well.

Compiled by Bruce Murray (not an expert at all; just a passionate advocate for sunflowers!)

November 23, 2025