

# Hello, Sunshine!

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The sunflower in its glory is recognized as a symbol of light, beauty, and strength. Resembling its solar namesake in color, shape, and size, these showy, daisy-like flowers, capable of reaching heights of 20 feet or more, are easy to plant, thrive in long, hot summers, and prefer to bathe in the sun for six to eight hours a day.

While it has been believed that sunflowers continually track the movement of the sun, according to the National Sunflower Association's website, this only occurs during the plant's bud stage. Once the flowerhead appears, however, it turns its face to the east. Although the reason for this phenomenon is unknown, it is likely to be a defensive response that helps to keep its seeds from scorching during very hot days.

**T** rue sunflowers belong to the genus *Helianthus annuus*, of which there are 52 known species. Some of the more popular varieties include the Russian Mammoth, a traditional giant sunflower that produces edible seeds; the Autumn Beauty, a spectacular cultivar with vibrant 6-inch flower heads; and the Teddy Bear, which grows to be 2- to 3-feet tall and displays fluffy, deep-gold blooms. Although the most familiar kinds are clothed in yellow, petals in shades of ivory, orange, gold, red, burgundy, and multiple colors also exist.

In the garden, sunflowers can be grown to provide adequate shade where needed and may be used to lure harmful insects away from plants so they can be consumed by goldfinches and other wandering birds. Studies have also discovered their ability to stabilize and remove contaminants from soil, water, and air, making them an important agricultural commodity.

Tall in stature, brilliant in appearance, and beneficial in so many ways, it's clear to see why these magnificent blooms have long held our fascination and appeared as such revered symbols throughout the ages.