

A Flower That Follows The Sun

The common sunflower is among the most spectacular of the sun loving plants. Its botanical name, *helianthus*, comes from the Greek *helios* “sun” and *anthos*, “flower.” Sunflowers did not, however, originate in Greece, but here in the Americas. Except for the large-headed variety, they are easily overlooked in nature and the garden.

Still, they remain worthy of our notice, while at the same time, demanding little of our time.

“Historically, they have been cultivated far less for their intrinsic beauty than for their usefulness. The oil from their seeds is used for food, soap, paints, and cosmetics, among other things,” said author Diana Wells. “They are high in protein and minerals, and in North America, grown and sold widely as bird food.” (From *100 Flowers and How They Got Their Names*)

Some of the sunflowers I grew last year were, in fact, volunteers that sprouted from sunflower seed that came from spilled bird food. Considering the source, I am both surprised and pleased by the quality of the flowers. The seed dropped from a bird feeder conveniently into large planter pots below. The sunflowers that grew turned out to be traditional yellow annuals.

There is a distinctive difference in appearance between the type I accidentally grew and the wild variety that border our agricultural fields or fill our empty lots. My accidentals grew as stalks with single flowers, although some of them grew a main and a secondary flower, instead of multi-branched like the wild kind.

I grew a third kind this year, an ornamental type called Autumn Beauty. This is a sunflower that has varied colored flower heads, not more than 5 inches across when mature. It has a soft, black pin-cushion center that attracts both bees and hummingbirds. It has thin slender petals that range in color from pale yellow to dark gold and medium rust to dark rust. The flowers, about 5 or 6 per stalk, tend to be top heavy, requiring staking or wall support.

There are dwarf varieties I have purchased that work well for containers, produce little pollen, and live long as cut flowers.

It is useful to note the differences between the dwarf, ornamentals and the large-headed types. It is the large type that most impress kids, giving them a sense of accomplishment when they grow them.

As an added premium, kids might also delight in the fact that the sunflowers begin their day turning their faces to the east and then follow the sun as the earth turns. Take note, the larger type require more water and richer soil than the other types.

Jerusalem artichoke, or *helianthus tuberosus*, is also in the sunflower family. Its tubers are edible and the plants can become invasive. They are sold in markets as “sun chokes.” The New Sunset Garden book recommends harvesting tubers every year and saving 2 or 3 for replanting.

The eccentric botanist John Goodyer (1592-1664) did not think very much of the Jerusalem artichoke. He kept piles of little papers, with recorded botanical information, facts and oh, so much more. In his opinion, which does not reflect the opinion of University of California Cooperative Extension Master Gardener Program, the Jerusalem artichoke caused, “a filthie loathsome stinking winde within the body.”

It is now up to the readers to take this information and use it as you will.

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Ramona Frances is a columnist for the Madera Tribune. She writes a column called Master Gardener. This column is provided by the University Cooperative Extension Master Gardener Program in Madera County. The Master Gardener program extends research based information in home horticulture and pest management, verified by University of California experts to the citizens of our state. Call the U.C. Cooperative Extension Office in Madera with your gardening questions at 559-675-7879, Ext. 204, to leave a message, or stop by the office on Mondays from 1- 3 p.m. to speak to a Master Gardener in person.