

Plant a Sunflower House

Overview:

Sunflower plants have cheerful blooms – they look very much like faces surrounded by colorful petals! They come in many different sizes. Some sunflowers are as short as two feet tall while others can grow to be 15 feet. The tallest sunflower on record was 25 feet tall! They also come in a wide range of colors including red, orange, yellow, and white. No matter the color, it's hard not to smile when looking at sunflowers.

Sunflowers are easy to grow. Just plant them when temperatures are warm during the late spring and summer, in a spot with plenty of sun and water. Sunflower seeds are edible for humans and wildlife. A favorite for feeding birds, people also eat the nutritious sunflower kernels and make oil from them, too.

Materials:

- Sunflower seeds (pick one or more varieties to grow)

Approximate Time to Complete: 7 to 12 weeks

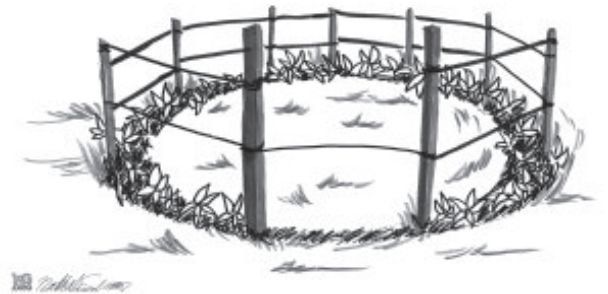
Location: Choose a location with full sun (6-8 hours of direct sun a day) and well-drained soil

Ages: Fun for all ages

Season: Late spring to early fall

Instructions:

1. Begin by picking out a good spot to grow sunflowers. Sunflowers grow best in full sun and prefer moist but well-drained soil. Your sunflower house can be any size or shape you want it to be, but a good start is to plant one covering an area that is 4' x 4'.
2. Next, create the house outline by sprinkling flour on the ground to mark the perimeter of the house where the sunflower "walls" will grow. Clear the weeds and grass in a 6-12" wide area along this perimeter line to form a planting bed.
3. Next, plant seeds in this cleared area. The plants that grow will form the "walls" of your house. You can plant seeds in a single row or in multiple rows to create thicker "walls." Make sure to leave at least one unplanted opening big enough to serve as your doorway.
4. Water your seeds and keep the soil moist, especially while the baby plants are young. Once your plants are older, they will grow deep roots and be able to handle drier conditions.
5. Once the plants have a few sets of leaves, gently place mulch around them to help keep the weeds and grass from growing back and competing with your sunflowers.
6. Depending on the variety of sunflower you planted, plants will begin to produce flowers in 7 to 12 weeks.
7. Time to play! Let your kids decorate and furnish the house by adding a stone doorstep or maybe chairs and a table for visiting with friends. Let them explore and play in the house during outdoor time.
8. Once the seeds begin to ripen, you may want to harvest them to snack on yourself or for the birds. Here are some tips for harvesting and preparing sunflower seeds:
 - Sunflowers that are ready for harvest will look dead or dying. They will be wilted, dry and brown, and most if not all of the yellow petals will have fallen off. The undersides of the heads will turn yellow when the seeds are ready for drying.



- Enclose the heads of your sunflowers in brown paper bags. Secure bag around the flower's stem tightly with a piece of string or twine. This will prevent the loss of any dropping seeds. It is important to use a paper bag, rather than a plastic bag, to prevent the development of fungus or mold on the seeds. The paper bag will allow the plant to breathe and prevent the accumulation of moisture. If you need to bring your plants indoors to complete the drying process, cut the bagged flower head from the plant about 12" below the paper bag. Turn it upside down and hang it in a warm, dry spot with good ventilation.
- Monitor the progression of the drying process. Open the bag each day and collect any seeds that have already fallen off. When the backside of the flower head has turned dark brown and become very dry, the seeds will be dried and ready to harvest. This process may take between one and four days. When the seeds are dried, and if your flower head remains on the stalk, you may cut it from the stalk about 12" below the bag. Don't remove the bag or you'll risk dropping the seeds on the ground.
- To remove the seeds, simply rub your hand across the seeds on the flower head and they'll pop right off the sunflower. Collect them in a large colander.
- Rinse them well with cold running water. Drain them thoroughly and spread them out in a single layer on a thick towel. Allow the sunflower seeds to air dry for a couple of hours. Pick out any foreign matter or debris that you can see.
- Your dried sunflower seeds are now ready for the birds to eat. For human consumption you can spread them on a cookie sheet and lightly toast them in the oven and salt them. Once they are completely cooled, store them in air-tight containers or re-sealable plastic bags. But be aware that these sunflower seeds will have their shells or hulls still on them and eating them is not recommended for young children. (When you purchase edible sunflower seeds in a grocery store, you are usually getting sunflower seeds kernels with the outer shells removed.) To safely eat the unhulled seeds, crack the shell with your teeth and spit out the shell pieces, consuming only the inner kernel. According to the National Sunflower Association, "If not chewed properly, the sharp pieces of shell could possibly puncture or attach to the linings of the esophagus or digestive tract. Medical literature confirms a number of cases in children where impaction has occurred due to eating sunflower shells."

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