

# Sunflowers

By Inês Dias

**Scientific Name:** *Helianthus annuus* **Irish Name:** Lus na gréine

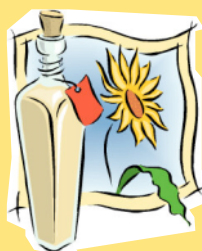
The Common Sunflower is an annual plant, with a large floral head and several outer flowers that resemble petals. It is believed to have been domesticated in western North America and brought to Europe by Spanish explorers. The term "sunflower" is also used to refer to all plants of the genus *Helianthus*, many of which are perennial plants.

Sunflowers are known for attracting wildlife. Butterflies suck their nectar while bumblebees and honey-bees gather pollen. They also attract other insects and small animals, such as squirrels. Their seed-filled sunflower heads if left to stand during winter provide additional food for birds.



## The Benefits

Sunflowers are grown worldwide as an ornamental flower and as a crop for its edible seeds and oil. Sunflower oil is considered a premium oil due to its light colour, low level of fats and ability to withstand high temperatures. Their seeds are most commonly used as healthy snacks, as an ingredient in various recipes and as birdseed. Sunflower seeds and oil have been found to have many health benefits for humans.



## Do sunflower heads track the sun?

A common belief is that sunflower heads track the Sun as it moves across the sky, a process known as heliotropism. In fact, only young sunflowers - when they are at the bud stage - exhibit this behaviour. At sunrise, the young heads mostly face east and over the course of the day track the sun's movement from east to west. Overnight, they return to an eastern orientation. When mature, the stems stiffen and the sunflowers stop this movement, maintaining an easterly orientation.



## Reaching for the Sky!

Sunflowers can typically grow up to 3 metres in height, depending on the species. There are extremes however and the latest record for the tallest sunflower is 9.17m, grown by Hans-Peter Schiffer in Germany, in 2014.

The most familiar colour for sunflowers is bright yellow petals with a darker centre but there are other colours, such as bronze, burgundy and red.

## Growing Sunflowers

- They grow best in locations with direct sun.
- They prefer long, hot summers to flower well.
- Their long roots prefer loose, well-drained soil.
- Sunflowers are heavy feeders so they need nutrient-rich soil.
- Due to their height, the stems require support.

