

How to...

Grow a sunflower

Plant sunflower seeds now and see them bloom around August.

From 23 to 31 May it is National Children's Gardening Week, which aims to inspire young people to take advantage of the warm weather and grow something. The sunflower is a great plant to grow from seed, and late May is the best time to do it.

They are called sunflowers because the young plants turn their faces to follow the Sun. They come in different sizes and other colours, such as pink, red and orange. Native American people started growing the flowers more than 5,000 years ago. Today they are grown all over the world, as blooms to admire and as a food crop. The seeds are roasted and eaten like nuts, or turned into cooking oil. They are also used to make products such as soap.

The flower-head (pseudanthium) of a sunflower is made up of lots of small flowers. The outer yellow petals are called ray flowers, and the ones in the circular centre – which later become seeds – are called disk flowers. There are lots of types of sunflower, from giants that grow up to 4.5 metres, to "Teddy bear" sunflowers that have fluffy looking heads. Ask an adult to help you select the right seeds. After handling soil, remember to wash your hands.

What you need

- Sunflower seeds
- Pot or flower bed
- Gardening gloves
- Rake or fork
- Trowel for digging
- Compost
- Watering can
- Plastic bottle
- Cane and string
- Sheet of newspaper



PETAL POWER
The world's tallest sunflower was nearly 11 metres high. It grew in the US in 2025.



Prepare a good spot

Find a sunny area. This means one that gets sunlight for most of the day. Sunflowers also like well-drained soil that isn't too wet and boggy. You can plant your seeds in a pot or a flower-bed – and make sure there are no weeds in the soil. Use a trowel to dig out any weeds, and a fork or rake to run over the soil until it has a crumbly texture like broken biscuits. You can add compost if you wish.

Plant your seeds

Plant your sunflower seeds around 10cm apart and press them about 1cm deep into the soil with a finger. Cover with soil, and water them gently. Sunflowers usually take between 11 and 18 weeks to flower from seed, but green shoots should appear in two weeks. If you spot slugs or snails, ask an adult to cut off the bottom of a plastic bottle and put it over the seedling to protect it.



Support your flower

It's a good idea to water sunflowers a little every day but don't over-water; if the soil gets boggy, stop watering. Check the soil and if it's dry and crumbly, add water. As they grow, if the plants are crowded, pull out some of the smaller plants leaving the taller ones about 45cm apart. Some people like to stick a wooden cane in the ground and tie the plant stem to it. This helps to support taller varieties.

Save the seeds

Leave the sunflower on the stem for at least two weeks, but when it starts to turn brown you can cut it off. Store the head in a sunny, warm and dry place for another week to dry out the seeds. Place the head on a sheet of clean newspaper and rub the seeds to loosen them. Birds love to eat sunflower seeds so you can scatter them in the garden or add them to a bird feeder – or look up recipes for roasting them.



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SCAN ME

27