



# NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

## Sunflowers are Easy to Grow for Cut Flowers (June 17, 2023)

*Beau Keen, Tulare-Kings Counties Master Gardener*

Sunflowers are one of those staples of summer that are immediately recognizable in the garden. I often see them along the roadsides or even as volunteer plants from spilled birdseed feeders. Whether natural, volunteer, or nursery-grown, the large sunny blooms often find their way into bouquet bunches at roadside stands and grocery stores. Sunflowers are an easy candidate for beginner cut-flower growers as the seed is large, germinates easily, and the mature plant does well in our typically sunny warm climates.

### Which Sunflower to Choose?

There are a large variety of sunflowers to choose from and the type will help determine how much space is needed. Varieties that are single stem will produce one nice medium size flower for cutting and tend to take up less space. Branching sunflowers produce copious amounts of small to medium sized blooms which can be harvested over a longer period, but they take more room in the garden.

Sunflower seeds in the big box stores and garden centers are often created for landscape use instead of cut flower production. Outdoors, bees love these pollen-rich varieties, but know that once inside the sunflower will tend to drop pollen all over the table as it opens and matures. Similarly, a landscape sunflower needs to be large to have an impact from a distance. A heavy headed, large faced, thick stemmed sunflower, while impressive outside, may be harder to balance in a vase without tipping over inside.

Try looking for sunflower seeds that are specifically bred for cut flower use as these typically hybrid sunflowers that do not produce much pollen once open and are better proportioned for floral design. Many florist sunflowers are from the “ProCut” series such as “Procut Orange DMR F1” or “ProCut Red F1.” Try ordering seeds online if you are not finding what you want in stores.

All sunflowers can be cut flowers, so there are different choices instead of ‘wrong’ ones. I suggest trying several or a mix. Sunflowers cross pollinate so seed saved year to year will be a mix of characteristics from your sunflowers and those within a few miles’ radius.

### Planting:

Plant sunflower seeds ½” deep in spring when the average frost date has passed. For example, Springville, CA is in plant hardiness zone 9b so the average date of last frost is February 15<sup>th</sup>. Since you are growing for cutting, be sure to purchase enough seed to replant every 1-2 weeks. Planting 10 seeds a week as a succession planting means 6-10 blooms each week through summer instead of a whole bunch of sunflowers all at once. All sunflower seeds might not make it due to pests such as ear wigs, cutworms, and even ground squirrels. With the spacing on the seed packet as a guide, try experimenting with planting clusters of 3-5 seeds that you thin to 1 strong candidate later.

### Harvest:

Sunflowers are a compound flower, which means they are actually made up of several smaller complete flowers with individual stamens and pistils (male and female flower parts). The center sunflower face is made up of disk flowers in a compact arrangement while each outside large petal is a single ray flower.

Cut the sunflower once 3-4 ray flowers or more have opened out of the center of a new flower, placing it immediately in water. You can wait until the flower has opened more, but the longer the time the ray flowers are exposed outside, the greater the possibility of being munched on by garden insects. Tight sunflowers may need a day or two in a cool area inside to fully open. Warm water and recutting of the stem can help this along.

Open sunflowers are still totally fine to harvest, but they may have a shorter vase life or be more susceptible to damage in transport.

### Tips:

- Direct seeding is easy but be prepared to troubleshoot pests damaging seedlings before maturity. Look up easy ways to control pests at the University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources website.  
<https://ipm.ucanr.edu/PMG/menu.homegarden.html>

- Harvest in the morning after the dew has dried as there is more water stored in the plant. An evening harvest means there will be more stored carbohydrates in the plant, which is a small boost to vase life. Heat of the day harvest is possible, but be ready to recut and rehydrate sunflowers, and allow time for stems to cool from outside temperatures to indoor.
- Change water frequently for cut flowers every 2-3 days.
- Sterilize buckets and tools for harvest and storage.
- Sunflowers do better with 1 teaspoon of bleach per gallon of water over the use of floral preservative.
- Plant more than you think you will need, as everyone else will want some too.

**The Tulare-Kings Counties Master Gardeners will answer your questions in person:**

Visalia Farmer's Market- 1st & 3rd Saturdays, 8-11 am, 2100 W. Caldwell Ave (behind Sears)

June 17 -Visalia Farmers' Market, 2100 W. Caldwell Ave (behind Sears), 8-11 am

June 17 - Backyard Beekeeping Talk, Tulare Public Library, 11 am

June 22 - Hanford Farmer's Market, 5:30 - 9:30 pm

**Questions? Call the Master Gardeners:**

Tulare County: (559) 684-3325, Tues & Thurs, 9:30-11:30;

Kings County: (559) 852-2736, Thursday Only, 9:30-11:30 a.m

Visit our website for past articles, sign up for our e-newsletter, or email us with your questions:

[http://ucanr.edu/sites/UC\\_Master\\_Gardeners/](http://ucanr.edu/sites/UC_Master_Gardeners/)

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/mgtularekings14/> ; Instagram at: @mgtularekings