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2015: Year of the Sunflower

Irene Tibbenham celebrates perennial sunflowers to support wildlife and give late summer flower power.



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Fig. 1 The centre of a sunflower is an example of the Fibonacci sequence.

Sunflowers are rightly known as 'happy flowers': they wholeheartedly embody cheerfulness. How often do you see them depicted with smiling faces? For many a child, a sunflower is a single flower, large, yellow, composed

of simple petals surrounding a 'face'; and something you plant in competitions to see how tall it will grow. As adults we may have other memories: perhaps images of vast acres of French monoculture, escapees from birdseed tables, Van

Gogh paintings or studying the Fibonacci sequence in maths (fig. 1). Or do you plant sunflowers to feed and entertain the wildlife on the vegetable plot? Sunflowers are simply bright and buoyant and most people love them!



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Fig. 2 *Helianthus* provide food for wildlife.



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Fig. 3 *H. maximiliani*.



Fig. 4 Semi-double-flowered form of *H. maximiliani*.



Fig. 5 *H. salicifolius*.



Fig. 6 *H. x laetiflorus*.

The name 'sunflower' is said to derive from 'sun follower'¹, heliotrope in Latin. Sadly, the story behind the name is not so bright and cheerful. In Roman mythology Clytie, a water nymph and daughter of Oceana, was discarded by her fickle lover Apollo after he espied a new challenge

elsewhere. Depressed and in tears, her head was downturned and fixed to the ground as she wasted away; but she turned her head upwards every time Apollo, the god of light, passed by, her adoring love-filled face following him until her life ended nine days later. It was said the gods turned

her into the sunflower, a genus we know to possess heliotropic properties².

Most of us are familiar with annual sunflowers, predominantly *Helianthus annuus* or possibly silver-leaved *H. argophyllus*. 2015 has been designated the 'Year of the Sunflower', referring to the annual form. If you have grown them from seed you may be familiar with their variety of forms: single-stemmed or multi-stemmed and branching; variations in petal colours, including yellow, red, maroon, chestnut-brown, pink, striped, and white; height from 6 inches to 6 feet or more; containing a cytoplasmic male sterile line (CMS) resulting in pollen-free cut flowers. You may have seen no need to investigate growing other forms, but let's take a closer look at this 'sun follower' as a hardy, herbaceous perennial.



Fig. 7 *H. giganteus* 'Sheila's Sunshine'.

¹The name 'sunflower' was used before *Helianthus* reached our shores, suggesting it had reference to other 'sun-following' flowers, perhaps *Calendula officinalis* or *Helianthemum nummularium* (syn.) *vulgare*.

²Solar tracking, when the heads track from east to west during the day, and in reverse at night.



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Fig. 8 *H. x multiflorus* 'Meteor', often known as 'Capenoch Star'.



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Figs 9a & b *H. 'Loddon Gold'* AGM.



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The most familiar perennial species is probably better known to vegetable growers. The Jerusalem artichoke, *H. tuberosus*, is grown as a root vegetable and has small, inconspicuous flowers. There are in fact over 60 species, predominantly of North American origin, which are for the most part perennial and late summer or early autumn-flowering, some allelopathic, producing one or more biochemicals that influence the growth, survival, and/or reproduction of other organisms. American taxonomists have rather a daunting task to sort them out, and the relationships are really not completely clear cut³.

We might well ask why we should grow sunflowers that come up year after year. Are they just more 'yellow daisies'? Indeed, when we consider yellow daisies, perennial sunflowers may not be the first that come to mind. But if we take into

account their amazing ability to attract birds, bees, bugs and butterflies (fig. 2) throughout their lifetime, we may make space for them. At a time when pesticides, profit-priority farming practices and bee diseases are prevalent⁴, planting perennial sunflowers can help to rebalance nature.

Providing late-summer colour when many garden perennials are beginning to fade and die down for winter, sunflowers can keep the garden alive with activity.

Not everyone's favourite colour, their flowers tend to be yellow and comparatively small against the annual forms – plant breeders take note! – but what they lack in finesse they make up for in sheer exuberant flower power.

My favourites are:

H. maximiliani (fig. 3) – named after Baron von Maximilian. Its flowers epitomize 'small is beautiful'. Rather tall (6–8ft), this neatly spreading plant flowers in late summer until the first frosts. It's an absolute pain to stake, so I tend to let it flop. Thinking it would never reach more than 3½ft in our UK climate, in our rather heavy clay soil in direct line of the prevailing wind, I planted them facing our front-garden windows where they grow to 6ft. Mistake? Probably, but had I not, we would never have been able to watch up close and personal the activities of tiny wrens in winter. I did think about moving it but it's stayed; every year it spreads a bit more but the temporary loss of light indoors is worth it. I now have a semi-double-flowered form (fig. 4).

³*Helia* is a journal dedicated to sunflower research, including interspecific crosses.

⁴See *Is your garden buzzing?* page 41



Fig. 10 *H.* 'Lemon Queen' AGM.



Fig. 11 *H.* 'Miss Mellish'.

H. salicifolius (fig. 5) – a sunflower grown for its willow-leaved foliage, rather than its flowers, this precious plant provides stunning silhouettes which remind me of the hairy monster-like characters in childhood comics. They also resemble old man cactus (*Cephalocereus senilis*), the supermarket-sold plants with 'eyes'. Rich-golden, dark-centred flowers appear eventually.

H. mollis – again the name says it all. Soft, downy leaves, with a silvery appearance created by the long white hairs on the leaves and stems – the tactile leaves need to be touched.

H. x laetiflorus (fig. 6) – probably the most widely grown of the genus, in my garden this is the one that really does need controlling. Flowering earlier, usually in July, it has magnificent dark-purple-tinged stems and flat open flowers. It reaches 4–5ft in my garden.

Other species to consider are *H. angustifolius*, *H. atrorubens* and *H. decapetalus*.

One of the downsides of species *Helianthus* is their level of variability but phenotypic variation can be overcome by choosing clonal cultivars. If you prefer to grow more dwarf forms e.g. *H. salicifolius* 'Table Mountain', they are likely to be vegetatively propagated.

H. giganteus 'Sheila's Sunshine' (fig. 7) – truly a giant, its lemon-yellow flowers top extremely tall and very straight stems 8–10ft high. With little competition at that height, the sun shines through their flowers, silhouetting the silvery-haired dark-green tepals.

H. x multiflorus 'Meteor', often known as 'Capenoch Star' AGM (fig. 8) – anemone-type flowers look you in the eye sitting agreeably in a vertical plane. Growing 3–5ft they are strong-stemmed self-supporting plants.

H. 'Loddon Gold' AGM (figs 9a & b) – a double-flowered form which seems to me more like a *Rudbeckia*. A more modest 3ft high in my garden, its flowers last for a long time.

H. 'Lemon Queen' AGM (fig. 10) – this seems to be the most readily available variety. Perhaps not possessing quite the same finesse as other sunflowers, it provides a regular flow of ragged citrus-yellow blooms on rough-leaved stems from late summer to autumn. A real stalwart of the autumn garden, with less-strident-yellow blooms for the more sensitive among us!

H. 'Miss Mellish' AGM (fig. 11) – its very large flowers are simply beautiful. Bright yellow, pencil-type rolled petals that don't seem to lie flat, giving a distinctive 'semi-spiky' effect. Height 4–5ft in my garden.

H. 'Inca Gold' (figs 12a & b) – this prostrate form (probably a decumbent



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Figs 12a & b *H.* 'Inca Gold'

cultivar of *H. debilis* subsp. *debilis*, the beach sunflower) gives the option of growing sunflowers in a hanging basket or pouch. Perhaps not reliably hardy throughout the UK (it hales from Florida), it is nevertheless perennial and makes an interesting summer-flowering variant for ground cover.

Other cultivars to consider are 'Bitter Chocolate'; 'Happy Days'; 'Gullick's Variety' AGM and 'Monarch' AGM.

Cultivation

Considered easy to grow, they suffer from few pests or diseases and prefer a sunny site on most alkaline/neutral soils. If you want to limit the size of your plant, it can be kept in check by digging around the clump each spring and removing the roots as they start to appear. Whether or not seedlings appear will depend on the hunger of



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Fig. 12b

your local bird population. *Helianthus* appreciate regular watering, but are drought tolerant once established. Whether or not you stake them is a matter of personal choice and garden style.

Gardeners with sensitive skin may want to avoid direct contact with the hairier forms.

Cut down stems in late winter when birds have finished feeding and the leaves have shrivelled. The thicker woody stems make great kindling when dried. In a good year, I've shredded the stems from my Jerusalem artichokes to make a potassium-rich mulch for my asparagus bed.



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Fig. 13 Variable foliage, here from left to right: *HH. salicifolius*, 'Miss Mellish', *maximilianii*, *x laetiflorus*, 'Gullick's Variety', 'Sheila's Sunshine'.



Fig. 14 *H. 'Meteor'* with heleniums at RHS Hyde Hall.

Use: plant perennial sunflowers in borders amongst other 'assertive' plants or use for naturalising near ponds or in prairie-style plantings.

Propagation: grow either from seed or division. Plants are best divided in early spring as soon as they can be seen.

Pests and diseases: generally trouble free but slugs love to munch young plants; some susceptibility to powdery mildew in stressful growing

conditions and sclerotinia. The greatest damage done to my sunflowers has been through the neighbouring farmer's spray drift. Be aware, sunflowers are very sensitive to plant growth regulator (PGR) pesticides known as 'straw shorteners'.

Flowers and foliage: All the species and cultivars I have come across are some shade of yellow, albeit ranging from pale and translucent citrus

to deep gold. Somewhere, some day, maybe a different colour will be found (Nagoya Protocol notwithstanding), and plant breeders can get to work.

Foliage (fig. 13), on the other hand, offers quite some variability, the simple leaves range from long and thin to broad and wide, from rough to smooth and glabrous, from hirsute and hairy to soft.

It is said that several sunflowers have scent. One has been named 'Bitter Chocolate', possibly more in anticipation than from experience – but I'm sure we all agree 'scent is in the nose of the beholder'. Let's just say when I use them as a cut flower, it isn't for their smell!

Regrettably we do not have a National Collection in the UK, and taxonomy and naming is confusing, even among experts⁵. It can be difficult to locate specific forms, but a bit of sleuthing amongst specialist nurseries or knowing a generous gardener will help.

There's not enough space to extol the virtues of all available species and cultivars, but I hope I have encouraged you to look further than the annual forms in this Year of the Sunflower and find a place for more permanent yellow cheerfulness in your garden. 🌻

Irene Tibbenham enjoys a relaxed garden looking outwards on to Suffolk farmland, assisted in her gardening duties by Rex cats, free-range chickens, wild ducks and impudent deer... plants either thrive or disappear.

⁵See page 77 *A Helianthus by any other name – full circle*