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Garden Oasis - Summer 1996

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Summer and Sunshine

Equally as compelling as the beauty and the seasons of the plant world are the history and lore surrounding some of its members. A notable example is *Helianthus*, or Sunflower, which we associate with summer and sunshine. Popular today, we celebrate it as a cut flower to give to others or to ourselves, or as seeds from the many varieties ready for the personal pleasure of planting for quick growth and tall yield.

A native of North America, the sunflower has had a long-time and pervasive presence. It was an important food source for all Native Americans. Some western tribes used it for at least 2,500 years. It was enjoyed both in the wild and as a cultivated plant. South of us, the Incas made the wild sunflower a symbol of their Sun God, because they believed its flower head turned to follow the sun's daily movement across the skies. Its likeness was placed on temple walls as well as fashioned into gold decoration worn by temple priests and priestesses.

Spanish explorers brought the plant back to Europe in the early 16th century. Peter the Great introduced it to Russia where the practice of chewing the seed began. The Russians are also credited with using the

seed to make oil.

It is also known that the flowers were used to make a lovely yellow dye, while the sunflower stalk produced a silky fibre excellent as writing paper.

One particularly appealing use of the sunflower occurred in 1847 when early Mormon settlers scattered seeds to mark their route from St. Louis to Salt Lake. The next summer's wagon train followed the sunflower trail across the plains into Utah.

Because the sunflower seems at home on the open plains, it is not surprising that Kansas adopted it as the state flower.



The sunflower exemplifies the joy of summer, a perfect season to relax in any garden oasis, including The Arboretum.

Where better to take a casual stroll and pause under a cool shade tree, or to enjoy twilight at one of our Tour and Taste Thursdays! Come celebrate summer with us. You might even chance upon a sunflower or two. Look in Garden for All Seasons and in Roots and Shoots. Imagine its history, its utility, and most definitely its beauty. Can you see the intricate spiraling pattern of its many seeds? Which way does its flower head look?





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