

Sunflower

Kansas State Flower



Facts about the Sunflower

- Early settlers celebrated this ubiquitous plains flower and in 1903, the Kansas Legislature designated the Sunflower, *Helianthus annuus*, as the state flower. Like many wide-spread plants, it is known by several other names such as Common Sunflower, Wild Sunflower and Annual Sunflower.
- The genus *Helianthus* comes from the Greek “*helios*” meaning “sun” and “*anthos*” meaning “flower.” The species “*annuus*” means “annual.”
- It is not the only species of sunflower found in Kansas. There is another annual species as well as ten perennial species.
- Our Sunflower grows in every Kansas county due to its adaptability to soils from sand to clay and toleration of dry to medium moist soils. In early fall, the yellow flowers give the prairies and roadsides a golden glow.
- Growing in full sun, the plant appears weedy with rough, hairy stems towering 5 to 12 feet tall and coarse toothed leaves. Contrary to folklore, Sunflowers do not follow the sun; they typically face eastward when mature.
- Like other members of the Aster family, the “flower” is actually an inflorescence, consisting of an outer circle of sterile ray petals and an inner disc of tiny florets, each capable of producing an individual fruit.
- The glorious yellow flowers are 3 to 6 inches wide; the spiral pattern of the florets maximizes the use of space. The arrangement as florets has been described as a mathematical formula using: the angle of growth, radius from the center, and index number of each floret.

Animal Uses of the Sunflower

- Bees and butterflies enjoy the nectar and pollen as they pollinate the disc flowers. Mammals, birds, and insects consume the foliage and flowers.
- The large seed heads serve the winter food needs of goldfinches, sparrows and many small mammals.
- Cattle feeds are made from the leaves, stems, and flowers as well as the seed remains created when extracting oil.

Human Uses of the Sunflower

- The Sunflower was domesticated by indigenous North and South American peoples over 3,000 BC. The Sunflower represented the Sun God to many Native American tribes and remains an iconic positive symbol, used in advertising and company logos.
- Sunflower seeds provide the third most common source of cooking oil. They also serve as a human food and can be converted into biofuel.
- Yellow dye can be extracted from the flowers and purple-black dye from the seed. Paper and latex can be manufactured from the stems. The stem piths are ultra light and can be used in flotation devices.
- Sunflowers tolerate high levels of soil toxins and are used to remove lead, arsenic, and radioactive isotopes from contaminated soil in a process known as “phytoremediation.”
- Gardeners appreciate Sunflowers for their beauty, drought tolerance, and deer-resistance. Over 50 cultivars of *Helianthus annuus* have been bred for the home garden and cut flower trade.