Sunflowers are one of the most popular genera of cut flowers; from first-time gardeners to experienced growers, they all gravitate towards these bold, easy to care for flowers.

Sunflowers originated in the Americas and domestic seeds dating back to 2100 BC have been found in Mexico. Native Americans grew sunflowers as a crop, and explorers eventually brought the flowers to Europe in the 1500s. Within the next few centuries, sunflowers became increasingly popular on the European and Asian continent, with Russian farmers growing over 2 million acres in the early 19th century (most of which was used to manufacture sunflower oil).

Probably the most well-known historical fact about sunflowers is in relation to Dutch painter Vincent Van Gogh, who painted a world-renowned still life series of sunflowers. The connection is so well known that a prominent variety series of sunflowers, Sunrich, has teamed up with the Van Gogh museum to sell “Sunrich – Van Gogh’s Favorite” quality-level sunflower.
Basic Types of Sunflowers:

Sunflowers can be annual (Helianthus annuus) or perennial (Helianthus maximiliani), but most modern sunflowers are annuals.

Branching vs Single Stem:

Single stem sunflower varieties are best for high-density plantings and are programmable for consistently beautiful flowers on tall stems. Succession planting will be needed for continuous blooms throughout the season.

- Single stem: ProCut® Series, Sunrich™ Series, and Vincent® Series

Branching varieties produce multiple shorter stems over the season, which makes them ideal for mixed bouquets and continuous blooms.

- Branching: Autumn Beauty Mix, Soraya (AAS Winner), SunBuzz, Suncredible®, Sunfinity™

Pollen vs No Pollen:

Many modern sunflowers are bred to be male sterile, or pollen-free, to help foster extended vase life and a nice, clean appearance. These also keep your tablecloths clean from pollen!

- Pollen-free varieties: Moulin Rouge, ProCut Series, Sunbuzz, Sunrich Series, and Vincent Series

Sunflowers that produce pollen are a great option for gardeners focused on supporting pollinators and looking for a lower price point. Luckily, there are many varieties of both.

- Pollen varieties: Soraya (AAS Winner), Ring of Fire (AAS Winner), and Valentine

Height/Size:

Another way to distinguish sunflowers is by their height and size. Smaller, ornamental sunflowers, such as the Sunrich or ProCut series are only a few feet tall, while American Giant Sunflowers can grow to be 15+ feet. Depending on their height, the size of the flower will also change.

- Tall sunflowers: American Giant, Kong, Mammoth, Sunforest
- Dwarf sunflowers: Smiley, Sunbuzz, Suntastic, Teddy Bear, Suntastic Yellow with Black Center (AAS Winner)
Sunflower Uses:
While the most obvious use for sunflowers is as cut flowers and for large displays of color in the garden, compact varieties bring a pop of color to containers for both patios and indoor home décor.

Sunflowers for Edible Seeds:
Finally, sunflowers can be grown for their seed or oil production. Some select varieties have a primary purpose of producing large, edible seeds that are great for snacking. The seeds are ready to harvest once the petals have withered and the seeds can be seen.
- Edible seed types: Feed The Birds, Mongolian Giant, Skyscraper, Super Snack Mix, Titan

How to Grow and Care for Sunflowers
Sunflower seeds can be direct sown after the risk of frost has passed or started indoors. Seeds should be sown ¼” to ½” deep and kept moist. Taller, larger sunflowers have a large taproot to keep them rooted and do not do well when they are transplanted so direct sowing of those varieties is recommended. Choose a site, or a container, in full sun, with average fertility and good drainage.

Recommendations for the best vase life:
If you’re growing sunflowers for cuts, here are some recommendations to extend the vase life of your flower.
- Cut when the petals or ray flowers just begin to open, before they have opened off the disc completely. It is recommended to cut in the early morning before the heat of the day.
- Remove the leaves below the water line and place in fresh water or properly measured fresh flower food solution.
- Check water regularly; sunflowers are heavy drinkers and can empty a bucket or vase overnight.
- Change water daily; sunflowers have what some call a dirty stem, as the water quickly turns cloudy with potential for bacterial issues.