

Sunniest Selections

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Big, gaudy, valued more for its nutritious seeds than as an ornamental, the sunflower was not considered a choice garden plant for most of its history. Then about 30 years ago, breeders began to exploit the great diversity to be found in the more than one dozen annual and three dozen perennial species of our native *Helianthus*.

Today it's the rare gardener who does not rely on one or several of the hundreds of selections of *H. annuus* for bright color from midsummer into fall. Besides the traditional golds, there are rich reds, bicolors, and lots of semi to fully double flowers. Dwarfs such as the 2' 'Musicbox', 3' 'Teddy Bear' and 4' 'Icarus' are tremendously popular, and there are a host of 5' or taller cultivars from the long blooming, strongly branching 'Star-burst Aurea', which bears unique shaggy semidouble gold flowers, to the velvety deep burgundy petaled 'Moulin Rouge'. If you want real height, the new 'Sunzill' carries 24" seedheads on 15' stalks.

Now gardeners are discovering that many perennial sunflowers are as showy as the annuals. In much demand are the double-flowered chrysanthemum-like 'Flore Pleno' cultivars of the 4' hybrid *H. x multiflorus*, the Gold Laceand 'Mellow Yellow' selections of the daisy-flowered swamp sunflower, *H. angustifolius*, and new introductions of the multi-flowered drought-tolerant *H. maximilianus*.

These are beginning to appear in quite a few catalogs. Less common in the trade are such recent "discoveries" as the very hardy *H. x lactiflorus*, which bears 4" bright golden flowers, and the woodland sunflower, *H. divaricatus*, with glowing yellow-orange flowers on 2' to 4' plants, native from Nebraska to Louisiana.