

# Gardening in the Zone

with Iowa Gardening Magazine's Liz Gilman



*Dr. VanDerZanden holds a bouquet of sunflowers.*

## Sunflowers

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If you've got some sun and you're hungry for a snack, then I've got just the flower for you. This week I interviewed Dr. Ann Marie VanDerZanden, associate professor of horticulture at Iowa State University, about sunflowers.

According to Dr. VanDerZanden, these cheery annual flowers are easy to grow in almost any type of soil and require very little pest control. But you do need to plant them in full sun because they are SUNflowers. In fact they need the sun so much that their blooms continually adjust their position from east to west so that they nod toward the sun all day long. The blooms range in color from the palest yellow to sunset orange and even shades of bronze and rust. If you are interested in growing sunflowers for cutting and arranging in vases, Dr. VanDerZanden recommends a dwarf variety like 'Ruby Moon', 'Claret' and 'Teddy Bear'.

The sunflower you are probably most familiar with and see the most in area gardens is the classic giant sunflower 'Mammoth Russian'. It grows up to 15 feet tall and produces delicious seeds from 14-inch flower heads. This type of sunflower is an ideal plant to teach children about the wonders of gardening. Their seeds are large for handling and the plant grows quickly and is very showy for the impatient little ones. The seeds are also a healthy snack containing protein, thiamine, vitamin E, iron, potassium and calcium. Or you can save the seeds for winter and let your kids feed and attract beautiful cardinals and other wildlife.

If you are interested in harvesting the sunflowers, Dr. VanDerZanden recommends that you tie a large paper bag around the heads when they begin to droop and the petals fade. The bag will conveniently catch any falling seeds and prevent the birds from eating all of them. By late September the heads should be ready to cut from the rest of the plant. From there you just pick the seeds out or brush them with your hand. It's important to keep them dry. The sunflower seeds can then be eaten raw or roasted with a little bit of salt.

Sunflowers are simple to grow, make wonderful flower arrangements and their seeds taste good too. Let the sun shine in!

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