Published on *Kitchen Gardeners International* (http://kgi.org)

Sunflowers Make Kitchen Gardens Feel Even Sunnier

Tue, 05/29/2012 - 10:27 -- Barbara Damrosch

Call me a purist, but my vegetable garden is zoned for vegetables. By and large, the flowers go in the flower garden and the veggies are planted each year in deep, cushy soil prepared just for them, without floral competition. Even edible flowers such as nasturtiums are legal only in the herb bed, a multi-use district. Only one has a permanent exemption: the sunflower.

Sunflowers somehow belong in a kitchen garden. After all, they are considered edible plants. The seeds are delicious, and the valuable oil is polyunsaturated. Rich in omega-6 fatty acids!

Sunflower seeds do, beyond a doubt, taste good, whether toasted and eaten as a snack, tossed over a salad or used in whatever ways would occur to a gardener with a bumper crop. But they?re very difficult to get out of their unpalatable ? and purportedly constipating ? hulls. I know agile-tongued people who can bite into the seeds, eat the kernels and flick out the hulls in one smooth motion, but we?re not all as talented as that. Machines that do it for you are expensive, and the technique of repeatedly crushing them with a blender and floating off the debris with water sounds tedious. Extracting the oil would also involve machinery.

No doubt, if the need ever arose, the sunflower could once again become an important local, homegrown food crop, especially if you could take your seeds to a community mill to be processed. And since the pith of the stem is said to be the world?s lightest vegetative substance, you could even make life preservers out of it, as was once the custom. Think of that.

But meanwhile, gardeners grow sunflowers in their food gardens because they look at home there. They are cheerful and unsubtle. They don?t blend well in ornamental borders, because they hog too much of the attention. I plant them in groups in the corners of my plot, among beans, broccoli and kale, where they proclaim it a farmer?s garden, one where hybrid tea roses would be out of place.

Late May is the perfect time to sow them, when the soil is beginning to warm. Just poke the seeds into the ground and thin them after they sprout to a foot or so apart. They come in many shapes and colors, from the classic yellow sunbursts to the autumnal reds and maroons, the small pale almost-whites, and the plush teddy-bear pompoms. My favorite variety is one called Soraya, whose golden-yellow blossoms continue to open all summer. Its stems are branched and long enough for cutting.

After the flowers have finished blooming, leave them to form seeds for the birds, who are expert at extracting the seeds. It?s a pleasure to see them flock to the heavy nodding heads in fall as they prepare for migration or a season of scarce food ? for which a nasturtium has nothing to offer.

Image (optional):

Image credit (optional):
source [1]
Crops:
sunflower [2]
Topics:
flowers [3]
Group content visibility:
Use group defaults

Promoted text:
Sunflowers Make Kitchen Gardens Sunnier

Source URL: http://kgi.org/blog/barbara-damrosch/sunflowers-make-kitchen-gardens-feel-even-sunnier

Links:
[1] http://www.flickr.com/photos/aussiegall/2162456862/
[2] http://kgi.org/crops/sunflower
[3] http://kgi.org/topics/flowers