



Albemarle County Fair Horticulture Giant Sunflower Competition

Sunflower Contest Rules:

- 1) You can enter individually or collectively as a club, (4-H, Scouts club, Boys & Girls clubs, etc.- enter in the age group that represents the age of the majority participants in growing the sunflower in your club.) Limit one entry per person (or group) per category.
- 2) Sunflower entries **must** be home-grown by the group or entrant from seed supplied by Cooperative Extension/Piedmont Master Gardeners through the Gordon Avenue Little Seed Library. (Titan Sunflower) Support from an immediate family member or club leader is OK.
- 3) Entries must be from live plants.

There will be two categories:

1. **Tallest sunflower** - will be measured from the cut stalk done at the soil surface to the tallest portion of the plant. Sunflowers will be laid horizontally and measured.
2. **Largest diameter flower** - will be measured across the center of the flower. Measurements will be made to the nearest 1/8 inch. Heads to be brought in cut from the plant, leaving a 12" stem attached. Only complete heads will be accepted, no partial heads. Fair Association will supply container to hold water to display flower during the week of Fair.

Open to: Ages 8 and Under
Ages 9–13
Ages 14–18
Open (adults)

Entries will be accepted between 12 noon – 8:00 PM Wednesday, July 31, 2024. Judging occurs on Thursday. In the case of ties for the tallest and largest in each class, ribbons will be awarded to the competitors whose plant journal (see below) is most complete.

The [Titan](#) variety of sunflowers are annual plants (*Helianthus annuus*) that perform best in sunny conditions, protected from deer browsing. They are easiest to grow by direct seeding into the ground but they can also be started indoors as seedlings and transplanted, which allows them to bloom sooner than if they are direct seeded into the soil. Because the Fair entry date is July 31, and the days to maturity is 75 days, we recommend that you try planting 5 seeds indoors 4-6 weeks before the last predicted frost and 5 seeds directly into the ground when danger of frost is gone. (We are Hardiness zone 7b, average last frost is April 5-15). If danger of frost occurs after you have planted, cover with buckets.

Step 1. Access Giant Sunflower Seeds.

Sunflower seeds (*Helianthus annuus* var. Titan) for this competition are available at no cost from the Gordon Avenue Library (1500 Gordon Ave, Charlottesville, VA 22903) Little Seed Library. Only sunflowers of this variety, Titan, will be accepted. Seeds will be available beginning on March 15, 2024 until April 30, 2024. You will be given an envelope with 10 'Titan' sunflower seeds.

Step 2. We recommend you start five of the ten sunflower seeds you have picked up, indoors to get a head start on growing. (Optional)

- Purchase seed starting soilless mix
- Choose 3–4-inch size biodegradable pots, such as the CowPots, Jiffy pots, or EcoGrow Or use large yogurt containers that you have poked holes in for drainage.
- Fill the containers with pre-moistened (not wet!) seed starting mix to about 1 inch from the top of the container.
- Poke in seed ½ - 1 inch deep
- Press in to get good seed-to-soil contact and moisten. Cover with plastic wrap.
- Place in warmest area of house or on a heating mat.
- Observe at least twice daily for germination and remove plastic wrap as soon as germinated. They can take 8-14 days to germinate. Keep soil moist. Do not allow soil to dry out during this time or seed will die.
- Move to south or east facing windows or under a “grow” light to provide best light. Best for at least 10-12 hours/day.
- Check and water the plant consistently. Depending on the type of pot you use, you may need to water daily or at least every other day.
- Before planting outdoors, plants benefit from gradual “hardening off” to acclimate the seedlings to the sun, wind and fluctuating temperatures. One week prior to planting outdoors, place in the shade initially and over the week expose to increasing amounts of sun. Be sure to keep check on temperatures and bring them back into house at night if temperatures are below 50 degrees F. Check for frost warnings.
- See garden soil preparation below. Dig hole slightly larger than your seedling container and set plants at about same level they were growing in pots
If transplanting in biodegradable pots, bury entire pot or trim down top to below soil level. Ensure good soil-to-root contact by pressing soil firmly and water well.

Step 3. Soil Preparation for Outdoor Starts or Transplanting

- Choose a sunny location for outdoor plantings. Sunflowers thrive in full sunlight, so ensure the chosen spot receives at least 6-8 hours of direct sunlight daily.
- Prepare the soil by mixing in organic matter such as compost, and ensure that the soil drains well (water doesn't sit on the surface for more than a few minutes before soaking into the soil. Sunflowers prefer fertile, loamy soil.

Step 4. Direct planting of seeds after the last threat of frost

- After following soil preparation, plant seeds directly into the garden, ½ to 1 inch deep, gently close the hole so the seed is covered. Space 10-12 inches apart. Water gently to get the soil good and moist.
- Continue to water regularly until seedlings emerge.

- If you choose to grow seeds in pots outside, make sure you choose big and deep enough pots to support this giant sunflower so that it does not topple in the wind. Be sure to mix some compost with the potting soil.

Step 5. Watering, Fertilizing and caring for your transplants or emerging seedlings

- Initially, **water consistently** to get the roots established. For plants grown directly in the soil, it is best to encourage the plant roots to grow deep into the soil by letting the soil surface dry out to a depth of about one-half to one inch. You can determine this by sticking a finger in the soil and feeling for where the soil is moist. If there isn't one inch of rain each week, it is likely the plants will need to be watered. Water the plants well about two times per week with about one gallon of water to each plant every time you water. Add the water slowly so it sinks into the soil and does not run-off.
- Sunflowers can benefit from applying some slow-release all-purpose **fertilizer** to speed up growth and produce larger flowers. Apply when the plants are around 6-8 inches tall and again when they start to produce buds. Use a balanced fertilizer, such as 10-10-10 or 14-14-14 according to the package instructions. If applying granules, sprinkle evenly around the base of the sunflowers, keeping it at a distance from the stem to avoid burning. Lightly incorporate the fertilizer into the soil using a rake or hoe then water the sunflowers thoroughly
- Plants grown outside in pots may need to be watered more frequently. Do the finger test to determine if the potting mix is dried out to a depth of one-half inch deep. Check the pots at least daily. Add water as needed to keep the soil moist, but not wet. Because the volume of soil the plant roots can access is small even in a large pot, it will be necessary to fertilize the sunflowers. Apply a balanced fertilizer according to package instructions; don't over fertilize, the plants won't grow well.
- **Mulching:** Apply a layer of mulch around the plants to retain soil moisture, suppress weeds, and regulate soil temperature. Use compost, straw, or pine straw for mulch. The mulch should be no deeper than 2-3 inches and should be about 3 inches away from the base of the plant to discourage small mammals and insects from chewing on the plant stem.
- **Protect from deer browsing.** Deer love young sunflower plants and can demolish them quickly. Deer spray repellants, fencing or netting initially is important.
- **Support for Growing Plants**
As the sunflowers grow, provide sturdy support stakes to prevent bending or toppling. Position the stakes carefully to avoid damaging the roots.
- **Monitor Regularly**
Keep an eye on growth patterns, water requirements, and signs of pests or disease. Keep an eye out for pests like aphids or caterpillars. Remove insects by hand. Often aphids can be washed off plants with a gentle stream of water. If manual removal is not sufficient to control pests, use only pesticides approved for organic gardening. **USE OF PESTICIDES MUST BE DONE BY AN ADULT AND MUST FOLLOW ALL INSTRUCTIONS ON THE PESTICIDE CONTAINER.**

Step 6. Keep a journal and record measurements (ages classes > 5 years old)

Use a ruler or tape measure to record the height of each sunflower plant. Be sure to include the date of the measurement. Document the growth progress in a journal for each plant, including planting date; watering schedule; date, type, and amount of fertilizer applied; flowering date; and any other special observations. Be sure the journal entries are legible so that judges read the documentation. The journal will be turned in along with the sunflower entered in the Fair

Step 7. Participate in the Fair.

All Fair entries must be completed on-line in FairEntry (see the Albemarle County Fair website at <https://albemarlecountyfair.com/entry-catalog/> or on-site.

Step 8. Harvest and Presentation for the Fair.

On the day of Fair Entry, examine your sunflowers and select the tallest plant and/or the plant with the largest diameter flower. For the tallest plant entry, cut the stem as close as possible to the soil surface. For the largest diameter flower entry, cut the flower so that it has 12 inches of stem attached. Consider showcasing any unique features or aspects of the plant/flower. **Don't forget to bring your plant journal to submit along with your sunflower entries.**

Step 9. Participate in the Fair.

The County Fair is held at James Monroe's Highland. Sunflowers should be brought to the Horticultural and Home Arts Building. Entries will be accepted between **noon and 8pm on Wednesday, July 31, 2024.** Enjoy the experience of participating in the Giant Sunflower Competition. Entries can be picked up on Saturday night after 8pm or on Sunday between 1-3pm.