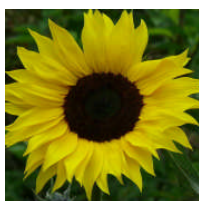




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# Helianthus

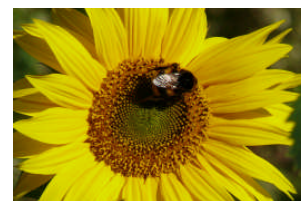
*Sacred Sun Flower*



The sunflower, *helianthus annuus*, has been cultivated for at least 3,000 years by Indians of the Americas and the Chinese. The Incas called them "chimalati", sacred emblem of the sun god.

Their image was carved on temple walls and shaped into gold jewellery worn by the priests. Sun priests wore a crown of sunflowers and carried the blooms in many rituals and ceremonies.

Spanish explorers of the 16th Century stood in awe beneath fields of these sacred suns for they had never seen anything so grand. They took the seed back to Europe where it first became widely cultivated in Russia. Many interesting hybrids soon developed like the Giant Russian Mammoth with spectacular 35cm flower heads atop towering 5m canes.



Later hybrids included multiple head varieties in a wide range of colours from chestnut brown and bronze, red and pink shades through yellow to nearly white. There are fuzzy headed doubles and darling dwarfs that thrive in containers.

All parts of this sacred plant can be used. The seeds are a delicious, versatile food source that produce a mineral-rich oil used in cooking, margarine and fine salad oils, a variety of skin-care products and as an excellent lamp oil. Sprouted seeds are eaten in salads.

Old seed cases produce paper and make a rich garden mulch. Drinking an infusion of flowers has weak insecticidal properties against mosquitoes and was used to combat malaria. Petals produce a lovely dye and are dried for potpourri. Unopened flower heads can be cooked and eaten like artichoke.

