

Around the world, the sunflower is the only crop harvested for seed that was domesticated in the United States. Sunflower was a common crop among Native American tribes throughout North America. Spanish explorers took the exotic sunflower plant to Europe in the 1500's, where it was widely used as an ornamental plant. However, the sunflower plant was never really viewed as a food plant until it reached Russia. By the early 19th Century

Russian farmers were growing over 2 million acres of sunflowers and by the late 19th Century, Russian sunflower seed had found its way back into the United States, probably being reintroduced by Russian immigrants.

Wild sunflowers can be found growing in ditches and other areas throughout much of North America. In fact, there are 50 species and 19 subspecies of sunflowers that are found in the United States' native habitat. Wild sunflowers have many flowers or heads and require insects for the pollination of the flowers. These wild sunflowers are the genetic basis of today's commercial sunflowers, which have only one flower or head per plant and may not require the help of insects in pollinating the flower.

There are two types of sunflowers grown commercially in the United States - oilseed and confectionery.

Oilseed Sunflowers - Oilseed sunflowers produce small black seeds that are very high in oil content. Oilseed sunflowers are processed into sunflower oil and sunflower meal (animal feed). Sunflower oil has a light color, a low level of saturated fats, a neutral taste, and is able to withstand high cooking temperatures. Sunflower oil is the preferred cooking oil in many countries around the world.

The small black seeds of oilseed sunflowers are also a favorite with the birds. Sunflower seeds are high in energy and provide many of the nutrients that most wild birds need.

Confectionery Sunflowers - Confectionery sunflowers are also known as non-oilseed sunflowers. Confectionery sunflowers produce larger black-and-white-striped seeds which are roasted and salted and sold for snacks. Machines called impact dehullers also removed the hulls of these sunflower seeds. Sunflower kernels are used a variety of food products from snacks to breads.