

Celebrate the Sunflower

The National Garden Bureau has declared 2021 as the “Year of the Sunflower,” and the honor is certainly well deserved.

BY JASMINA DOLCE

To help promote gardening and create excitement and inspiration at the retail and consumer levels, the National Garden Bureau (NGB) selects a handful of crop categories to celebrate each year. As part of its “Year of” program, the selected categories receive promotion directly from the NGB and all members of the industry are encouraged to engage with their customers to help support the initiative.

For the annuals category, the NGB declared 2021 as “Year of the Sunflower.” So how can you and your customers take advantage of this designation? I had the chance to pick the brains of some industry members that are well acquainted with the sunflower market. Here’s what they had to say.

Jasmina Dolce, GPN: The National Garden Bureau has declared 2021 the Year of the Sunflower. The organization always selects plant categories that are trending and reflect a need in the marketplace. Why do you think the sunflower category was chosen for 2021?

Olivia Sellards, customer marketing manager, Syngenta Flowers: Sunflowers are perhaps the most iconic symbols of summer in North America. Most often used to emote happiness, positivity and joy, it leaves no question that sunflowers are one of the top impulse-driven picks in the garden center or floral shop. Undeniably, whether gardeners or not, people of all kinds are drawn to the photogenic flowers to welcome the warm days of summer and welcome in the harvest. Harvesting seeds, feeding wildlife or simply snapping a selfie with sunflowers, people love this nearly perfect flower.

Georgia Clay, new plants manager, Monrovia: Trends toward pollinator plants and low-maintenance plants with a long season of interest. Sunflowers are no longer a “one and done” plant in the garden. Efforts in breeding have extended the sunflower season. Now, with varieties like SunBelievable, we are seeing continuous blooming from spring through fall without any more care than other annuals in the garden. They are also great sources of nectar for bees and other beneficial insects. This is especially important in late summer/fall when nectar sources are harder to find.

GPN: What are your personal favorite attributes of the sunflower?

Olivia: The color and the shape! Bright golden petals and a fuzzy brown center are easy to gravitate toward for most. They symbolize summer, freedom and warmth.

Georgia: Sunflowers, especially when planted in mass, scream HAPPY to me. They add a big colorful impact with very little TLC required.



'SunBelievable Golden Girl' from Monrovia



Sunfinity from Syngenta Flowers



GPN: What changes and innovations have you seen over the years within the sunflower category?

Mike Murgiano, head of product management, Syngenta Flowers:

While breeders have continued to improve upon potted sunflowers sold in garden centers, most of those improvements have been gradual upgrades in plant habit, flowering, and color range, resulting in more attractive plants at retail for impulse sales. Sunfinity, however, was the first new sunflower to come to market that addressed the most significant weakness of this product class, which is its very short flowering period for consumers. The launch of Sunfinity has now also spurred interest in other forms of sunflowers, including new cutting propagated varieties with mounding habits and smaller flower sizes.

Georgia: We've seen a focus on plants that are smaller and well branched. We are also seeing more blooms per plant and a desire for a longer blooming season.

GPN: How long has Monrovia been involved in the development of sunflower varieties?

Jonathan Pedersen, vice president of sales and business development, Monrovia:

On a plant hunting trip to the U.K. in 2016 we noticed a very interesting sunflower at Thomson & Morgan that didn't act like a typical sunflower. In 2018, we introduced 'SunBelievable Brown Eyed Girl'.

GPN: Tell me more about SunBelievable. What makes it special and unique to the market?

Georgia: SunBelievable is daylength neutral, which means it blooms in spring and fall when the days are shorter. It is also sterile, which allows it to continue to flower profusely for months — over 1,000 flowers on a single plant throughout a season! SunBelievable also has a fantastic, mounding habit with excellent branching throughout.



SunBelievable is a sterile selection, allowing it to bloom profusely for months.

GPN: And how long has Syngenta Flowers been working with sunflowers?

Olivia: Syngenta Flowers has been working in this class for decades.

Long time breeding for single-stemmed, big-flowered, seed hybrids for potted plant sales has paved the way for extensive advancements in non-traditional sunflowers, with none other than our Sunfinity sunflower being the most innovative revolution in this class that the industry has ever experienced. Because Syngenta Flowers has expertise in producing sunflowers so efficiently, the entire North American sunflower team at Syngenta has focused their breeding efforts, making our Gilroy, California, site the epicenter of sunflower research for uses in other areas of agriculture. We know a lot about sunflowers!

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GPN: How did Sunfinity come about, and how has it evolved since its introduction?

Olivia: Sunfinity is an innovation that took many years and many discussions to develop. The first results of breeding crosses looked light "freeway flowers," but our breeders knew they had something special. The amount of branching and the abundance of flowers were an indication that with some specialized breeding techniques, this new type of sunflower could change the way we see the class as a whole. Continued breeding gained more and more attention, as the



Syngenta Flowers has focused its sunflower breeding on making Sunfinity easy to grow and ship.

large plants were hard to hide in outdoor R&D trials. It was very clear, Sunfinity was exceptional and the market potential was limitless.

Mike: However, to capture that potential, we also knew that we needed to “tame” the genetic power of Sunfinity so that growers could fit it into normal production and shipping protocols. So, after confirming our initial concepts, we focused both our breeding and finished plant production research on making Sunfinity easier for growers to manage. Our focus for improvements on the current Sunfinity remains focused in this area while we explore new and exciting consumer traits.

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to keep it simple at retail. Consumer studies show that shoppers are more willing to buy Sunfinity when coupled with the consumer-branded program, where the benefits can be visibly seen without additional education. The same studies also noted that people were more likely to spend additional money on this type of sunflower versus traditional one-stemmed varieties.

GPN: Do sunflowers present any challenges for growers?

Olivia: Sunflowers are pretty straightforward to grow, and even Sunfinity has been mastered by growers. One of the biggest challenges is sell-through and merchandising. The shelf life of traditional single-flowered sunflower is so short there is typically a lot of markdowns and shrink. Merchandising and placement is key to selling fresh sunflowers.

Georgia: ‘SunBelievable Brown Eyed Girl’ can be finished with little to no growth regulators. Some of the other new varieties do require a rigorous PGR plan. All like full sun and long days but ‘SunBelievable Brown Eyed Girl’ is also day length neutral and has no special fertilizer or soil requirements.

GPN: Why do you think sunflowers are growing in popularity at the consumer level?

Alicain Carlson, technical trial manager, Syngenta Flowers: Sunflowers are so popular at the consumer level because they are recognizable, happy, warm flowers. They are symbols of summertime and are among the few flowers that almost every person, whether they have any gardening experience or not, recognizes and can identify by name. Since many traditional garden types have seeds that are edible for both humans and wildlife, they connect to consumers at many different levels. And since most sunflower seeds are easy to germinate and grow, they are gateway flowers that provide a sense of success for many first-time or inexperienced gardeners. At the same time, breeders have created so many innovations in sunflowers that keep consumers interested and connected to the iconic sunflower look. Sunflowers come in unique shades, bicolors, single and double flowers with different heights, and plant habits.

Georgia: With easy-to-care-for, beautiful blooms, they can fit into practically any sunny spot in the garden — even tough areas and containers. They are also a great nectar source for beneficial insects and bees. Smaller habits are making the plants more accessible to small gardens and container gardens as well. **gpn**

GPN: How do you think growers can capitalize on the sunflower category?

Jonathan: Sunflowers check many of the boxes for an annual that the consumer is looking for today! Great in a container or in the ground with flowers for an extended time. ‘SunBelievable Brown Eyed Girl’ is grown from a cutting, not seed, and is easily programmable for the grower.

Olivia: Keep this category clean, without too much confusion to price points and size formats. Sunfinity branded pots are available in 2.5 quart and 1.5 gallon. We don’t recommend sizes that are smaller or in between