

### Sunflowers: History and Cultural Importance

Sunflowers are bright, cheerful flowers that have been admired by people for centuries. Their golden petals and large, round heads make them stand out in gardens and fields. But sunflowers are not just beautiful—they have played an important role in history, culture, and agriculture.

Sunflowers originated in North America, where Indigenous peoples cultivated them as early as 3000 BC. Archaeological findings suggest that they were among the first domesticated crops in what is now the United States, even before corn reached the region. Indigenous communities used sunflower seeds as food, ground them into flour, and extracted oil from them. Over generations, they selectively bred sunflowers for larger seeds and improved oil production. The plant also had medicinal uses, and some tribes incorporated sunflowers into ceremonies. When Spanish explorers arrived in the Americas in the 16th century, they took sunflower seeds back to Europe, where the plant quickly gained popularity.

In many cultures, sunflowers symbolize happiness, warmth, and loyalty. In China, they represent long life and good fortune. In Greek mythology, there is a story about a water nymph named Clytie, who fell in love with the sun god, Apollo. When he ignored her, she transformed into a flower, always turning toward the sun. This myth is often linked to the sunflower, but originally, the plant in the story was heliotropion (heliotrope), a different flower whose name means "sunturning" in Greek. However, after sunflowers were introduced from America and became widely known in Europe, people reinterpreted the myth, assuming that the sunflower was the flower described in the legend.

In the 18th century, Russia became one of the world's largest sunflower producers. During periods of religious fasting, the Russian Orthodox Church restricted the consumption of rich foods, including butter and some vegetable oils. However, because sunflower oil was not widely used at the time, it was not included in these restrictions. This made it a popular alternative, especially during Lent before Easter, earning it the nickname *postnoe maslo*, meaning "Lent oil." As demand grew, Russian farmers began cultivating sunflowers on a large scale.

In the late 19th century, Russian immigrants brought sunflower cultivation back to North and South America. While sunflowers had originally been domesticated by American Indigenous peoples thousands of years earlier, **their** use as a major oilseed crop was largely influenced by Russian agricultural practices. Thanks to this, Argentina grew into one of the world's leading producers of sunflower oil.

Today, sunflowers are grown all over the world for various reasons. Their seeds are used for snacks and cooking oil, while sunflower oil remains a key ingredient in food and cosmetics. Sunflowers also benefit the environment by absorbing harmful chemicals from soil and providing nectar for bees and other pollinators, as well as seeds for birds and other wildlife.

Beyond their agricultural and ecological importance, sunflowers have left **an indelible imprint** on art and culture. The famous Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh created a series of sunflower paintings that are cherished worldwide. Sunflowers are also popular in decorations, festivals, and as symbols of hope.

Whether in history, agriculture, or art, sunflowers continue to be meaningful.

Heliotropion is ...

- 1) a native Greek plant that botanically is the same as the American sunflower.
- 2) a plant from a Greek myth that turns its flowers to the sun like sunflowers.
- 3) an alternative name that Greeks use for Apollo, the Greek god of sun.
- 4) what sunflowers have been called in Greek since the 16<sup>th</sup> century.