

Harvesting Sunflower Seeds

By Marilyn Reeves

With their pretty golden-yellow petals and happy looking dark brown faces, sunflowers are some of the prettiest flowers on the planet – a favorite of photographers and painters alike. But this past August, the sunflower farmers in eastern Colorado were inundated by a plague. I'm not referring to the Coronavirus, or a plague of insects, but rather a plague of inconsiderate people congregating in huge numbers to photograph their fields of blooming flowers. Some were courteous enough to take their 'selfies' from a respectful distance, while others were invading the fields themselves, tramping down the crops, and destroying much of the local farmers' harvests. The situation became so intolerable the local authorities had to be called in to help mitigate the crowds.

I tried to research what it takes to cultivate a field of sunflowers and learn how they are harvested. Here are some of the facts I gleaned on line:

- Sunflowers are suitable for Colorado's dry land farming, although they do require a minimum of 34 inches of water per year, so the farmer often has to irrigate to supplement the sparse rainfall that occurs on our eastern plains.
- But first he must prepare the soil by loosening it to a depth of four to six inches, as the tap roots cannot work their way through compacted soil.
- He must also be vigilant in the mitigation of weeds.
- I found the following instructions in a farmer's on-line guide regarding birds:
 - Avoid planting sunflowers within a quarter mile of marshes or sloughs that consistently harbor large quantities of birds and contain water in later summer. Leave at least a 100-yard buffer strip of a crop not as attractive to birds, such as small grains, adjacent to shelter belts, groves, or other wooded areas.
 - Do not plow or till earlier harvested sunflower fields in the vicinity, since these areas can act as alternative bird seed reservoirs. After harvest leave all stubble standing until the crop is harvested, as birds may be attracted to these areas in search of food.

The only article I could find about harvesting sunflowers gave this advice:

If you decide to let the seeds harvest on the stalks, follow these steps:

1. Protect from critters.
2. When seeds are fully ripened, cut the stem 1 inch below the head.
3. Rub the seeds from the head with your hand to collect in a bucket.
4. Rinse harvested seeds.
5. Allow the seeds to dry out on a paper towel or newspaper overnight before storing.

Somehow I doubt that this process is used for those vast fields of flowers we see growing in eastern Colorado. There must be a mechanical method the farmers employ to harvest all those seeds. But not knowing much about farming, and not being very good at research, their process of harvesting remains a mystery to me.

All I know is that I love sunflowers – both their beauty and their delicious seeds. When I was a kid I used to love to crack open the salted black and white shells with my teeth and spit out the shards in order to get to the tasty little nugget inside. But nowadays, I prefer to enjoy my sunflower seeds already hulled. My favorite is the Dole chopped salad kit called ‘Sunflower Crunch’ with sunflower seeds, bacon bits, and a most delicious dressing. If you haven’t already indulged, you might like to give it a try.