

## BORDER CROSSINGS

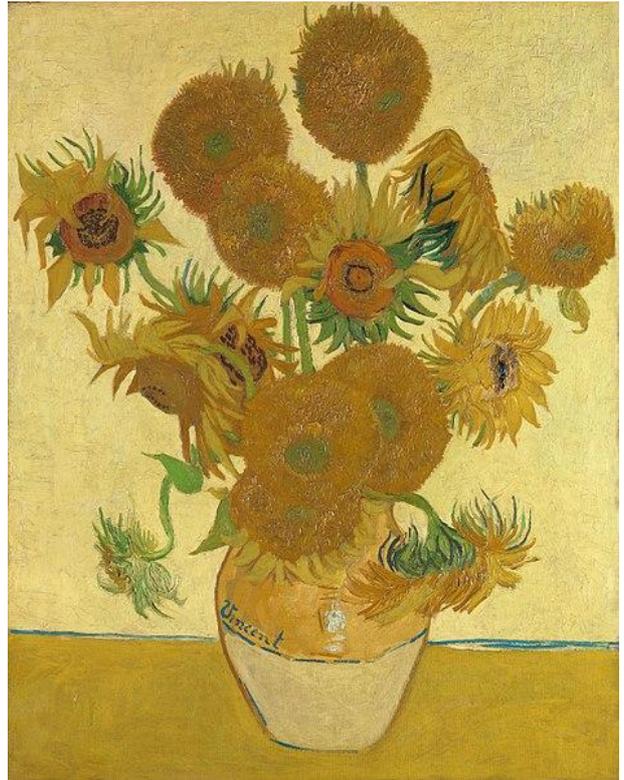
# ORIGINS

## BOTANY BAY LEARNING RESOURCES

### Sunflowers



[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:A\\_sunflower.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:A_sunflower.jpg)



"Sunflowers" by Vincent Van Gogh, 1888 (National Gallery London)

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vincent\\_van\\_Gogh\\_-\\_Sunflowers\\_\(1888,\\_National\\_Gallery\\_London\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vincent_van_Gogh_-_Sunflowers_(1888,_National_Gallery_London).jpg)

#### What do Indigenous people call this plant?

In the indigenous language Nahuatl, the sunflower has two names:

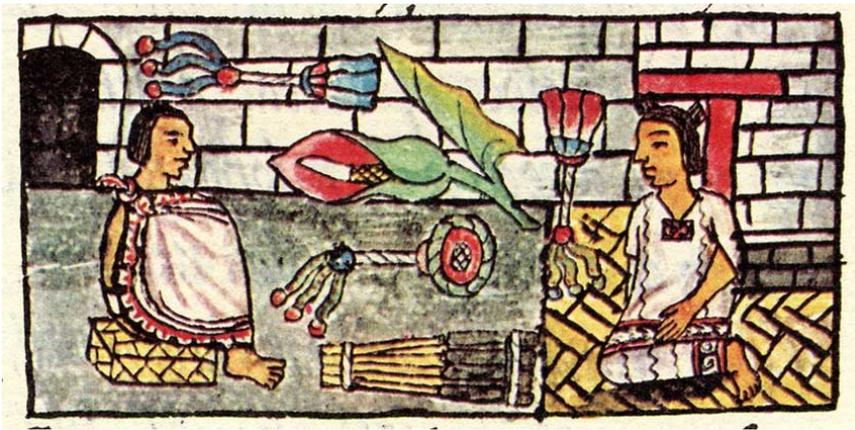
'Chimalacatl' which means 'shield reed'

'Chimalxochitl' which means 'shield flower'.

The Spanish who went to the Americas called the sunflower 'girasol' and 'mirasol'. The English name comes from the Greek name - 'Helios' meaning sun and 'anthos' meaning flower.

#### When was this plant first documented?

In the Florentine Codex (written 1545-1590), Bernardino de Sahagún recorded the use of sunflowers in rituals and its religious significance in Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Aztec Empire.



Flowers as banquet gifts - the sunflower is in the middle. Image from The Florentine Codex

Francisco Hernández, the physician of King Felipe II of Spain, wrote about sunflowers in 1615. He noted that the Aztec people used them to treat chest infections and to treat burns and stings.

How many varieties of this plant are known?

There are 70 varieties of sunflower. They have different heights and flower colours, but all are instantly recognisable as sunflowers.

Where and how was the plant originally grown and used?

Archaeologists have found evidence of sunflower cultivation from as early as 2600 BC. According to Francisco Hernández, sunflowers were cultivated in fields.

Indigenous people in Mesoamerica use the sunflower in many ways. The seeds can be eaten fresh or ground up and mixed into a traditional thin porridge-like drink called atole. The flower petals and pollen are used to make dyes for cloth and face paint and the stems are used to make baskets. Sunflowers are also used to make musical instruments and to make bird snares.

Bernardino de Sahagún recorded that at banquets, guests were given tobacco to smoke and then sunflowers. The tobacco pipe represented a spear, war and valour. The sunflowers represented a shield. After this, they ate their meal and were served drinking chocolate at the end. After the banquet, the host accompanied by the guest and musicians would go to the temple of Huitzilopochtli to make offerings of tobacco and sunflowers.

How do Indigenous people relate to this plant?

For the Aztec people, the sunflower is a symbol and metaphor for war and is clearly depicted on the shields of several gods. Huitzilopochtli (the God of War), Tlaloc (the God of Rain and Fertility) and Opochtli (the God of Hunting and Fishing) all have sunflowers on their shields.

Several historians have suggested that the sunflower and images of sunflowers were suppressed after the Spanish colonisation because of the links to war and solar religion (sun worship). The modern Otomi word for sunflower, 'dä nukhä', actually means "big flower that looks at the sun god," which is a clear reference to pre-Columbian solar worship.

The Spanish would not have wanted the plant to become a symbol of unity and nationalism amongst the people they colonised. By suppressing the sunflower they hoped to ensure no rebellions occurred.

#### When and how did this plant first come to Britain?

The sunflower was introduced to Europe in the 16th century by the Spanish and spread throughout Europe. It was primarily used as an ornamental garden plant as sunflowers are drought resistant and pest resistant and very easy to grow. Later, by the 1800s, sunflowers spread to Russia where they became popular for the oil that could be extracted from the seeds for cooking.

#### Special properties

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#### Fun facts

Sunflower plants move throughout the day so that they're always facing the sun. This is called heliotropism.

Each sunflower is made up of thousands of tiny flowers. The brown centre of the flower is made up of 1000 - 2000 tiny individual flowers.

The sunflower can produce 1000 - 2000 seeds.

The tallest sunflower measured 9.17 m (30 ft 1 in) and was grown by Hans-Peter Schiffer in Karst, Germany,

The most sunflowers picked in one minute in the 'Sunflower Field' in Minecraft is 89, and was achieved by Marwan Albastaki at WAFI Mall, Dubai, UAE, on 25 October 2019.

Sunflowers are best planted along fences and walls as they can be damaged by strong winds. For this reason, farmers prefer shorter plants.

Resources edited by Phil Hindmarsh. Project Manager Marine Begault.

BOTANY BAY is a participation and learning project by Border Crossings' ORIGINS Festival, made possible with The National Lottery Heritage Fund. Thanks to National Lottery players, we have been able to engage five schools across the country with the Indigenous heritage of plants, gardens and food.



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