

How to Harvest Sunflower Seeds in 2026: American Meadows Experts Share When to Cut, Dry and Save Seeds

Updated 2026 guide shows gardeners when to harvest sunflower seeds, how to save them, and ways to use seeds for roasting and feeding birds.

SHELBURNE , VT, UNITED STATES, August 11, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- As late-summer sunflowers begin to nod under the weight of their seed heads, gardeners face an important seasonal question: "when are sunflower seeds actually ready to harvest?"

American Meadows, a trusted resource for wildflower gardeners for more than 40 years, has updated its [sunflower seed harvest guide](#) for 2026 with practical advice for recognizing mature seeds, harvesting and drying seed heads, and putting the harvest to use. New additions this year include step-by-step instructions for roasting homegrown sunflower seeds and making sunflower seed suet cakes for backyard birds.

"The seed head tells you everything about when it's ready — you just have to know what to look for," said Tabar Gifford, Master Gardener and Partnership Cultivator at American Meadows. "Get the timing right, and one sunflower can provide seed for next year's garden, a homemade snack, or food for the birds through winter."



A bee visits a blooming sunflower before seeds develop, highlighting the plant's value to pollinators before the late-season harvest begins.

AT A GLANCE: HARVESTING SUNFLOWER SEEDS

- Watch the flower, not the calendar. Sunflower seeds are ready to harvest when the flower head droops, petals have faded, the back of the head turns from green to yellow-brown or brown, and the seeds look plump and begin to loosen.
- Don't harvest too early. Seeds need time to fully mature on the plant before they are harvested

for saving, eating, or feeding birds.

- Dry seeds thoroughly before storing. Mature, completely dry seed can be set aside for planting the following season.
- Put the harvest to work. Sunflower seeds can be saved for next year's garden, roasted for eating, or incorporated into homemade suet cakes for winter bird feeding.

WHEN ARE SUNFLOWER SEEDS READY TO HARVEST?

Rather than relying on a specific calendar date, American Meadows recommends watching the sunflower itself for signs that its seeds have matured.

As the plant approaches harvest, the flower head begins to droop under its own weight. Petals fade and fall away, the back of the flower head changes from green to yellow-brown or brown, and the seeds become plump and begin to loosen in their sockets.

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A goldfinch feeds on a mature sunflower seed head in fall, showing how garden-grown sunflowers can provide a natural food source for backyard birds.

One common harvesting mistake is cutting the sunflower while the back of the head is still green. Seeds need time to mature on the plant before they are harvested, particularly when gardeners intend to save them for planting the following year.

Gardeners who notice birds getting to ripening seeds first can cover the flower head with a breathable bag while it finishes maturing. The covering helps protect the developing seeds while still allowing airflow around the flower head.

HOW TO HARVEST AND DRY SUNFLOWER SEEDS

Once a sunflower head has matured, harvesting is straightforward:

1. Cut the flower head. Using sharp scissors or pruners, cut the stalk about one foot below the

bloom, leaving enough stem to make the head easy to handle and hang.

2. Finish drying if needed. Hang the seed head upside down in a warm, dry, well-ventilated location until it is thoroughly dry and the seeds are easy to remove.
3. Remove the seeds. Hold the dried flower head over a bucket or container and rub it firmly to loosen the seeds. Petal fragments and other plant material can be separated afterward.
4. Dry before storing. Spread cleaned seeds in a single layer and allow them to dry completely before storing seeds intended for next year's garden.

Only mature, thoroughly dried seed should be stored for future planting. Labeling saved seeds with the sunflower variety and harvest date can also make it easier to keep track of what will go back into the garden the following spring.

CHOOSING SUNFLOWERS FOR A SEED HARVEST

For gardeners planning next year's sunflower patch with harvesting in mind, variety can make a difference.

Large-headed sunflowers can produce an especially rewarding seed harvest. Mammoth Grey Stripe is a classic heirloom sunflower known for its substantial flower heads and striped seeds, while Mongolian Giant produces exceptionally large seeds. Colorful varieties such as Autumn Beauty offer ornamental value throughout the growing season while also allowing gardeners to collect mature seeds at season's end.



Harvested sunflower seed heads show the range of sizes and seed development gardeners may see at the end of the growing season.



A field of sunflowers lines a rustic fencepost, showcasing the bold color and classic charm of one of the world's most recognizable flowers. Their vibrant presence adds warmth and visual impact to any landscape.

Gardeners can browse American Meadows' [full sunflower seed lineup](#) to compare varieties based on height, bloom color, growing conditions, and their goals for the garden.

NEW FOR 2026: TWO WAYS TO PUT THE SUNFLOWER HARVEST TO WORK

Saving seed for next year's garden is only one option. American Meadows' updated guide now walks gardeners through two additional ways to use harvested sunflower seeds: roasting them at home and incorporating them into homemade suet cakes for backyard birds.



Dried sunflower heads are carefully de-seeded, with harvested seeds collected in a bucket—an essential step in preserving the sunflower's value and preparing for reuse.

ROASTED SUNFLOWER SEEDS

For home roasting, American Meadows recommends soaking harvested seeds overnight in salted water — approximately six cups of water to one-quarter cup of salt. Gardeners short on time can instead simmer the seeds in the saltwater mixture.

After soaking, drain the seeds without rinsing, remove any remaining bits of flower or plant material, and spread the seeds out to dry for several hours.

Arrange the dried seeds in a single layer and roast at 325°F for approximately 25 to 30 minutes, stirring occasionally, until golden brown and fragrant. They can be served plain or finished with olive oil and a favorite seasoning.

HOMEMADE SUNFLOWER SEED SUET CAKES FOR BIRDS

Sunflower seeds can also help extend the garden's value into winter by becoming an ingredient in homemade bird suet.

The American Meadows recipe combines melted beef fat or lard with sunflower seeds, millet and chopped dried fruit such as cherries, raisins, or crab apples. Honey can also be added if desired.

The mixture is poured into small containers, refrigerated until it begins to firm, and then frozen

until the cakes are ready to be placed outside for backyard birds.

For gardeners who already grow sunflowers for pollinators, color or cut flowers, harvesting mature seeds provides another way to use the plants after their summer blooms have faded.

QUICK QUESTIONS ABOUT HARVESTING SUNFLOWER SEEDS

Can you save sunflower seeds from cut flowers?

Only when the flower head was allowed to mature sufficiently before it was cut. For reliable seed saving, gardeners should allow the seeds to mature on the plant and look for the same harvest-ready signals: a drooping head, brown or yellow-brown backing, and plump seeds that have begun to loosen.

Do sunflower seeds need to be soaked before planting?

No. Properly harvested and dried sunflower seeds do not need the saltwater soaking step used in the roasting recipe.

Can sunflower suet cakes be made ahead for winter?

Yes. The homemade suet cakes can be prepared in batches and kept frozen until they are needed, allowing gardeners to preserve part of the late-summer sunflower harvest for winter bird feeding.

FROM SUMMER BLOOM TO NEXT YEAR'S GARDEN

For American Meadows' gardening experts, harvesting sunflower seeds is part of what makes growing the plants so rewarding.

"Harvesting seeds is one of those moments when you get to see the entire growing cycle come together," Gifford said. "A flower that supported pollinators and brought color to the garden all summer can become next year's flowers or help feed birds through the colder months. That connection is one of the things that makes growing sunflowers so rewarding."

The complete American Meadows sunflower seed harvest guide includes detailed harvesting and drying instructions, step-by-step photos, and complete recipes for roasted sunflower seeds and homemade bird suet.

Gardeners looking to grow sunflowers or explore more seasonal planting advice can find additional resources in the American Meadows [Wildflower Learning Center](https://www.americanmeadows.com/blogs/wildflower-learning-center).

See The Full Sunflower Seed Harvest Guide:

<https://www.americanmeadows.com/blogs/wildflower-seeds/how-to-harvest-sunflower-seeds>

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