

# Join the Bee Cause – Plant Big Smile Dwarf Sunflowers



(Helianthus annuus)

A typical bumble bee life cycle spans three seasons—spring summer and fall, so they need access to food for more extended periods of time than most wild bees. Planting a dwarf sunflower variety such as "Big Smile" gives bumble bees lots of food over several seasons. If old flowers are cut off, this plant will bloom continuously, beginning 50 days after seeding. Start it in a pot indoors in April and it will be in bloom by June. Bumble bees will love it. And you'll be planting a native species that is easy to grow so long as it is in the sun. (Sunflower varieties have been bred from the native species Helianthus annuus.)

Some important considerations with sunflowers—make sure you use a "day length neutral" variety (Big Smile is one). These bloom at any season. Make sure you don't use one that has been bred to lack pollen (e.g. the otherwise attractive "Firecracker" series). A dwarf-sized sunflower can be planted in most locations including balconies and small urban gardens.

The Big Smile dwarf sunflower is extra-dwarf and extra-early. It is attractive in small beds, containers, and 4-6" pots. Its 3-6" blooms are bright golden-yellow with a black center. It is also known as common sunflower and annual sunflower. It is day neutral and will grow to about 10-15" in containers or 12-24" in the garden.

## Here's how to grow a Big Smile for Bumble Bees

You can sow the seed directly after the last frost in groups of 3-4 seeds, 12mm (1/2") deep. Thin to one plant when true leaves appear. Alternatively, because the roots dislike being disturbed, you can sow in the pot you will be using about 3-4 weeks before you can put them outside. Plant 1 seed per 15cm (6") pot or 3 seeds per 4 liter (gallon) pot. This plant will need 7-14 days to germinate at 21-24°C. If you're transplanting to beds, wait for 3-4 true leaves to appear.

Use light, well-drained soil of low to moderate fertility. Plants should be spaced out so that leaves do not touch – about 20-30 cm apart. Crowding promotes taller growth and weaker stems.

The Big Smile requires a sunny location. You need 21-27°C during the day and 10-16°C at night. Warmer temperatures cause stretching; cooler temperatures cause plants to be more dwarf.



**Bumble bees  
love it!**

