

# planting and care of Sunflowers in landscapes



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## About this genus



Photo by Bob Peterson

*Helianthus debilis*

Of Florida's 17 native sunflower species, gardeners will most often find two: Dune or Beach Sunflower (*Helianthus debilis*) and Narrow-leaf Sunflower (*Helianthus angustifolius*). Dune Sunflower naturally occurs along the coast, but adapts well for inland use. Narrow-leaf Sunflower grows throughout the Panhandle, North and Central Florida south to about Lake Okeechobee.

All of Florida's native sunflowers are excellent nectar plants for butterflies and pollinators.

## Description

Dune Sunflower is a perennial providing bright yellow blooms throughout the year. It will die back in North Florida in the winter. Depending on the variety (see Caution), this plant may be spreading or upright. As a spreading groundcover, it may sprawl several feet, but generally does not exceed 1 or 2 feet in height. The upright variety can be taller.

Narrow-leaf Sunflower has showy golden flowers 3 inches across with reddish-brown centers. It can reach 4 to 6 feet in height. It has long, narrow, rough leaves, hence its name. This plant blooms in the fall and is perennial, but may die back to the ground in the winter, particularly in the northern third

of the state. It's a great choice for a large moist meadow, around a lake edge or retention pond, in a ditch or at the back of a bog garden.



Photo by Anita West

*Helianthus angustifolius*



Photo by Nancy Blissett

*Helianthus carnosus*



Photo by Lisa Roberts

*Helianthus debilis* used in the landscape



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## Planting

Give Dune Sunflower room to roam, as it spreads readily. For mass plantings, space plants 3 to 4 feet apart. Do not irrigate after establishment. Plant Narrow-leaf Sunflower where you won't mind it spreading by underground rhizomes. Space plants 2½ to 3 feet apart. Consider placing it where you won't mind seeing spent stems and flowers after the plants finish blooming. These plant parts have their own subtle beauty, particularly in contrast with their surroundings, and are essential sources of food and shelter for insects and birds.

## Seeds

Seeds are available commercially. To collect your own, allow flower heads to dry on the plants, then break them open to collect seeds.

## Plants

Both species are available in containers from native nurseries. Dune Sunflower and Narrow-leaf Sunflower also are often available at commercial garden centers (see Caution).

## Care

Dune Sunflower will, over time, get leggy and messy-looking. Remove old stems and let new plants sprout from seeds. Light trims every three months will help keep foliage looking fresh.

Narrow-leaf Sunflower stems can be pinched back in late spring or early summer to encourage shorter, bushier growth and more blooms. When the plant spreads, it can be divided for planting elsewhere.

## Other Species

Gardeners may encounter two other species: Rayless Sunflower (*Helianthus radula*) and Lakeside Sunflower (*Helianthus carnosus*). Rayless Sunflower has no sunny yellow petals. Instead, this perennial presents dark, purplish flower heads on erect stems 2 to 3 feet high in the fall. The leaves are also unusual — large, round, thick and relatively flat on the ground. You can use this plant in well-drained moist soils from Lake Okeechobee northward. Mix a few in with ornamental grasses and other wildflowers for a great visual contrast.

Lakeside Sunflower blooms from late spring to fall with very showy 3-inch yellow flowers with greenish yellow centers. The 1- to 3-foot-tall stems rise from an evergreen basal rosette. Central and North Florida gardeners can use it in most irrigated or otherwise moist-to-wet soils.



*Helianthus debilis* seedlings at 22 days

## Site Conditions

Both species need full sun for best flowering and to avoid leggy growth. They will tolerate light shade for part of the day.

Dune Sunflower is salt- and wind-tolerant. It likes exceedingly well-drained sandy soils. Avoid persistently moist or heavily irrigated situations.

Narrow-leaf Sunflower likes moist to wet, acidic soils.

## CAUTION

There are three distinct subspecies of Dune Sunflower: East Coast Dune Sunflower, West Coast Dune Sunflower (*Helianthus debilis* subsp. *vestitus*) and Cucumberleaf Dune Sunflower. Most native nurseries should know the difference; other nurseries may not. Environmentally conscientious gardeners living along the coast should ask their nursery supplier for the subspecies native to their locale. This can help preserve the distinct identities and ecological roles of these plants.

Narrow-leaf Sunflower naturally ranges as far west as Texas and as far north as New York. Large retail outlets and national seed suppliers sell varieties originating from out of state. Their performance in your landscape can be different.