

Sunflowers and their products

Sunflowers do not only cheer up our gardens with their striking beauty, but also cheer up our daily food intake. The head of the sunflower has been a source of food and oil for around 5,000 years. Indigenous Americans in Mexico and Peru were the first to cultivate sunflowers.

The flower itself is a tightly packed group of many flowers. The outer ones are called ray florets and the ones filling the circular head are called disc florets. The ray florets are the so-called petals. The disc florets mature into the fruits commonly referred to as sunflower seeds.

Sunflower oil is extracted from sunflower seeds. Sunflower oil is light in taste and appearance and is good all-round cooking oil. Although excellent for shallow frying, it is not suitable for deep-frying because it smokes and burns at very high temperatures. Sunflower oil is rich in polyunsaturated fatty acids such as linoleic and oleic acids and low in saturated fatty acids. It also supplies more Vitamin E than any other vegetable oil. Its biggest rival would be olive oil.

Safflower oil is often confused with sunflower oil; it is simply made from safflowers, which are from the same family as the sunflower.

Sunolive oil is available in most supermarkets and as the name says, is a blend of sunflower and olive oil, containing more mono-unsaturated fats than sunflower oil.

Sunflower seeds are one of the most commonly available seeds. The seeds can be eaten whole, raw or cooked, added to breads and cakes, or sprinkled over salads or breakfast cereals. Sunflower seeds have certainly become a very popular healthy snack, being a good source of protein, iron, calcium, potassium and phosphorus.

Here are a few quick serving ideas for sunflower seeds:

- Add to your favourite tuna, chicken or turkey salad recipe
- Garnish mixed green salads with sunflower seeds
- Add sunflower seeds to scrambled eggs
- Use fine ground sunflower seeds to dust your meats with in place of flour
- Sprinkle sunflower seeds onto hot and cold cereals
- Experiment by adding sunflower seeds to your favourite muffin recipe

But, remember fat is fat, although the type of fat in sunflower oil is far healthier than the fat in butter, ghee or lard, a spoonful of butter and a spoonful of sunflower oil will contain the same amount of calories. The key message being, use sparingly in cooking. Fifty percent of sunflower seeds is fat, so if you do treat yourself to this healthy snack, beware of your portion size. One serving, 30 grammes (1 oz) contains 160 calories and 6 g of protein.