

<http://healthycommunitiesfl.com/community/june/the-serendipity-of-sunflowers/>



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Sunflowers. For awhile I had been wondering how to make more people aware of the plight of our pollinators.

Sunflowers just might be the answer.



It all started a few years back when, having health issues, I decided to start a garden. I thought that the exercise, the fresh air, and the fresh food I would grow would help me reclaim my health. The only problem that was my garden wasn't producing much, and the closer I paid attention, the more I realized that there were no pollinators visiting my garden. That's when I started researching ways to attract pollinators and first started reading about the problems honeybees were having. Among the most scary and unknown is something called Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD) where seemingly healthy hives are found empty of all adult bees, with the queen and brood left behind with no way to care for themselves. It was a mystery, and still is to some degree, but it made me wonder, "What's happening to the bees?" That's when I started researching and reading in earnest about the plight of the pollinators.

What I learned is that if there is a silver lining to this dilemma of the honeybees, it is that the issue has shone a light onto the predicament that all pollinators are facing, causing their great demise through loss of habitat and overuse of pesticides. This is important for everyone, because two of every three food crops can't produce without pollinators, including alfalfa used to feed cattle and all of the fruits we eat: blueberries, watermelon, peaches, and much more. Without pollinators, we would not only experience the crash of our food system but of our economy as well, as everything is connected.



So I started keeping bees myself and I planted a wide variety of flowering plants that provide both the nectar and pollen sources that bees require to thrive. But I felt there had to be more that I could do. Sure, it was fine that I planted flowers, but we needed a whole lot of people planting flowers if we were going to make a difference! That's when I seriously started thinking about sunflowers since they provide both the pollen for the protein that the larvae need to grow and the nectar that provides the carbohydrates for energy. Here in the Florida Panhandle where summers are long and hot, sunflowers provide forage during the dearth when the necessary forage is in short supply. Working as a master gardener volunteer with the school garden program, I was excitedly telling Kendra Zamojski, the Director of the Leon County Extension Center, about wanting to involve the school kids with the Great Sunflower Project (<http://www.greatsunflower.org/>), a citizen's science project in which participants record the number of bees that visit specific sunflowers every day at the same time. Sunflowers are indicator plants used to monitor the health of our pollinators by tracking their numbers and how often they visit a given plant. Also, because sunflowers are easy to grow they can provide a wonderful hands-on experience for the kids as they become more aware of the importance of our pollinators and how easy it is to grow plants that care for them.

When Kendra heard me talking about sunflowers she told me that I had to connect with Kathryn Ziewitz of the Leon County Sustainability Office as she was involved with a big grassroots initiative that was just starting and was all about sunflowers. That was at the end of January and was my first introduction to Talla-Happy Sunflowers. I became involved in this very worthwhile community endeavor, not only to share how easy it is to help and provide for our pollinators, but as a symbol of love for our community. Sunflowers!



Talla-Happy Sunflowers grew from a gathering of locals who wanted to show love of place, our place, Tallahassee/Leon County. With \$500 (\$250 from the city, \$250 from the county), the idea of planting sunflower seeds sprouted and Talla-Happy Sunflowers was born. In no time this idea has taken root. It's a wonderful campaign that many can participate in. The idea is to turn this into a community-wide project and share and plant sunflower seeds all over, making this region the sunflower capital of the South. It has been rapidly growing from a great idea into a magnificent project. You can learn more here: <https://www.facebook.com/TallaHappySunflowers>. Our first big celebration was at Springtime Tallahassee on April 6, where we gave out almost 9,000 free seed packets. Since then we have given out hundreds of seed packets at various events from Earth Day celebrations to Art in the Park to volunteer recognition events and more. Wherever people are gathered and enjoying this great community of ours, we've been there to share the love and the sunflower seeds!

There are other celebrations planned as well, including mass sunflower plantings and place-specific plantings, garden dedications, workshops, and in the fall, our Great Sunflower Project will be introduced into the after-school Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) program here in Leon County.

Soon, people from all over will see what a great place this really is as a result of all of the Talla-Happy sunflowers growing everywhere, and it will be a wonderful visual statement showing how much we care for our pollinators. And, don't forget, by providing forage for our pollinators, sunflowers provide health benefits to people through gardening! As I mentioned, pollinators are critical to growing healthy fruits and vegetables. Getting pollinators into your garden will increase your yield and, as I've learned, improve your health.

A lot has happened since I first began my healing journey. What I found to be the biggest factor in my health and well-being without exception is diet and lifestyle. In the past, I was lazy about my food, eating fast food or buying prepackaged foods just because it was easier. I learned that not only were those "foods" not nutritious, they were actually costing me my health. But by making changes that include adding many more fresh vegetables to my diet, getting regular exercise and keeping a regular sleep schedule, I was able get off medications that I was told I would

be on for the rest of my life. I am now healthy and energetic. And it's all thanks to the bees that pollinate our gardens and provide all of us with what we need to live healthier and happier lives! Let's show them the love in return!

You are encouraged to be a part of this terrific project to show your love and care of place, connect with others in our community, and help us all be healthier just by planting sunflowers! If you know of any place that would look particularly nice with a swath of sunflowers growing, please let us know. And don't forget to plant your own! Happy gardening! See you out in the sunflower patch!