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# SUNNYSIDE THYMES

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## A Gardener's Wish List

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***Heliopsis helianthoides***, commonly known as **false sunflower** or oxeye sunflower, is a power flower that you may want to add to your garden for several very important reasons.

But first, let's discuss this rather patronizing name. Let it be known that false sunflower is no imposter when it comes to garden impact. Like the 'true' sunflowers, which are found in the genus *Helianthus*, *Heliopsis helianthoides* commands attention with its vibrant orange-yellow center disks and yellow rays. But to botanical taxonomists, there are several important differences between the true sunflowers of *Helianthus* and the false sunflowers of the genus *Heliopsis*. One of the primary distinctions is that in *Heliopsis* both the ray and disk flowers can produce seeds; only the disks in *Helianthus* produce seeds. Additional contrasts can be found in the morphology of the phyllaries as well as more erect flower heads in *Heliopsis*. Both are genera Asteraceae.

The heads of *H. helianthoides* have between 8 and 16 ray flowers surrounding the many disk flowers. The apex of the stem may display either a single flower head or be branched with multiple flower heads. This plant is known for producing an abundance of inflorescence. Sharply toothed, and lanceolate to ovate, the leaves of *H. helianthoides* present with siliceous based hairs that create a rough texture. The tops of the oppositely attached leaves are often dark green while the undersides are a lighter green.

A prairie wildflower native to Indiana, *H. helianthoides* demands its daily sun. But it's not so picky when it comes to water or soil. Dry to moderately moist soil conditions are acceptable - it tolerates some drought. Good drainage is essential,

Photo: Thomas L. Muller,  
Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower  
Center, Univ. of Texas



and grows well in a wide range of soil types, even clay or nutrient deficient soils. In fact, overly organic soils may not provide a foundation to support this 3 to 4-foot-tall bushy plant in the way a firmer clay soil can. In which case, staking may be an option in the garden. Additionally, deadheading can clean up spent blooms as well as increase the production of new flowers. Aphids are a possibility, though rarely a major problem. Mildew can form when planted in shadier areas. Let this be a reminder that *H. helianthoides* wants its sun: when planted in full sun mildew should not be an issue.

With its height and dense foliage, *H. helianthoides* makes a wonderful rear garden border. It forms clumps, often two to four feet in diameter. These can be divided in late fall or early spring. It is easily propagated from seeds, which can be sown indoors in late winter or early spring -- or the seeds may be planted directly outdoors in the Spring or Fall. As with many perennials, don't expect spring plantings to bloom the first year, though Fall plantings may bloom the following summer.

You should expect blooms beginning in July to August, and lasting two months, perhaps even longer. *H. helianthoides* is one of the earliest blooming and longest blooming 'sunflowers', and is a magnet for bees, skippers, butterflies and other pollinators. Birds will find the seed a nutritious food source. And the gardener will find the false sunflower an authentic summer power flower – easy to grow and maintain, and easy to create summer impact with. And with so many flowers, don't forget to cut some for the table, and of course give some to your friends. *Continued*

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## ***Ophiopogon umbraticola* -- “Sparkler”**

At first sight, this messy, grass-like clump may look like someone’s bad hair day, or perhaps a Tribble from Star Trek, or maybe Beaker the Muppet from Sesame Street. But further investigation discovers that this is *Ophiopogon umbraticola*, a groundcover and border perennial that is worth understanding. Far Reaches Farm and Botanical Conservancy of Port Townsend, Washington understands and fluently discusses the nuance and aesthetic of *Ophiopogon umbraticola*:

*“This is an indicator plant useful for delineating highly refined plant geeks. Perfection of scale and form with very narrow slightly curled leaves and delicate white flowers followed by improbably rich blue shiny fruit. Involuntary moaning is perfectly acceptable.”*

And they weren’t the only ones to appreciate this plant’s grace and style. In 2017, Kentucky’s Theodore Klein Plant Awards, which promotes new and superior plants for the state’s landscapes, declared *O. umbraticola* a winner for Kentucky gardens.

This hardy and easy-to-grow perennial presents fine-textured, sessile, dark green, grass-like foliage that reaches eight inches high. Though it is not a grass, nor a lily as some believe, but rather a member of the asparagus family: Asparagaceae. “Umbraticola” is a shade-lover, by name. Planting in ordinary soil, even some clay, is fine – so long as it is a moist habitat. *O. umbraticola* is deer and rabbit resistant, and free from other major pests.



*O. chingii*, Photo: Far Reaches Farm with permission.

Come June, and lasting through September, tiny white flowers accent the fine, textural, wispy leaves to give *O. umbraticola* its “Sparkler” moniker. Then in October, the fiery white flowers are replaced with the most beautiful cobalt blue fruit.

It may not be easy to find *Ophiopogon umbraticola*, though it is well worth the search. You may bump into *Ophiopogon-chingii*, which is a genus cousin with a similar fruit, though lacking in *umbraticola*’s refinement. And then everyone is selling the “big daddy” of the *Ophiopogon* genus, “mondo grass” -- *Ophiopogon japonicus* -- which your neighbor already has, and which indicates that they may not yet understand your exceptional horticultural aesthetic.

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