



LOUISIANA SUNFLOWERS

It may come as a shock to many people to know that sun-worshipping pagans are common in every parish of Louisiana. Not unlike the ancient Greeks, Egyptians, and Inca, they track our star across the diurnal sky with faces uplifted in joyful adoration. They are actually members of the single largest family in the world—a family of plants, that is. The sunflower family contains nearly 24,000 species, about 1 of every 4 kinds of plants. They grow worldwide but are most common in tropical and temperate regions. There are 396 varieties known to live in Louisiana, from the red clay hills down to the marshlands. Family members are diverse and consist of trees, shrubs, vines, annuals, and perennials. All are characterized by unusual flowers. What appears to most observers as a flower is actually an inflorescence that consists of many small individual ray or disc flowers, or a combination of both.

Familiar sunflowers include the type used for birdseed and those commonly found in gardens, such as zinnias, marigolds, daisies, and cosmos. Dandelions, thistles, ragweed, goldenrod, sagebrush, saltbush, and cockleburs are also sunflowers. A healthy salad contains sunflowers in the form of fresh lettuce, and we consume parts of other sunflowers like artichokes, chicory, safflower, chamomile, and Echinacea. Extracts of marigolds are used in the poultry feed, cigarette, and cola industries. Others are considered medicinal and important honey plants. Except perhaps in the dead of winter, it is difficult to experience a Louisiana day without being exposed to some form of sunflower. (adapted from Bayou-Diversity (Kelby Ouchley); LSU Press)



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