

## *Annual Sunflower*

Long after agriculture had taken a firm grip among the Pueblo people in northern New Mexico wild plant resources continued to be eaten, used medicinally, and to make all manner of everyday items. We can still see New Mexicans enjoying wild plant foods: quelites (wild spinach), piñon, and the annual sunflower are great examples.

The *Helianthus annuus*, or Annual Sunflower, loves to grow in disturbed soil, so you often see it in newly tilled land or along roadways. If you drive around New Mexico in August or September you are bound to see these wild sunflowers. They need very little water to survive, making them ideal candidates for high desert living. They grows long and spindly on hairy stalks, crowned with bright yellow flowers with brown centers shooting off in all directions.

Did you know that sunflowers were one of, if not the only, wild plant to be domesticated north of Mexico? But there is scant archaeological record of them showing up in New Mexico until a bit later, meaning it must of come to us from some other place where it likely originated.

Since the Annual Sunflower loves disturbed soil, it is likely that as people migrated, it tagged along, taking root in the disturbed soil humans left behind. Not only spreading throughout the Rio Grande Valley, the sunflower made its way across the Great Plains by way of trade, making it now ubiquitous in much of the West.

The *Helianthus annuus* was a valuable source of food. The seeds can be eaten in their natural state, baked, or ground into flour to add to other foods. High in both calories and nutrients sunflowers were a good source of nutrition.

In Puebloan cultures sunflowers were also used as decoration for dances and feast days, as well as having medicinal and practical uses. In San Ildefonso to this day the flowers are woven into women's clothing for corn dances, and in Ohkay Owingeh men weave the flowers into head dresses worn for harvest dances.



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Medicinally the sap from the stalk was used to clean small wounds, and in Zuni this sap was used to treat rattlesnake bites. Puebloans used the strong, light stalks as bird snares and for arrow shafts, and the centers could be hollowed out and dried to make flutes.

Like all plants here in the high desert, the Annual Sunflower had lots of uses, and in a semi-arid environment, people use every possible resource at their disposal. The Annual Sunflower is a great example of a wild plant resource!