

SPRING *Art & Nature Activity*

SUNFLOWER HOUSE

MATERIALS

- STAKES
- HOE/ PITCHFORK/ SPADE
- COMPOST FOR FERTILIZER
- MULCH (OPTIONAL)
- STRING/ TWINE

TIME

Preparing the Bed: Approximately 1 hour

Planting Tubers: Approximately 45 min.

Harvesting: Approximately 45 min.

OBJECTIVE

Building a sunflower house stimulates imagination and encourages playtime, drawing children to a magical outdoor setting. Using jerusalem artichokes is a simple and rewarding way to have plants grow back year after year. This engagement may also introduce a new food to childrens' pallets, as jerusalem artichokes can be eaten! Kids will enjoy being involved in the entire process; from planting, to watching the plants grow tall and flower, playing inside the structure, and finally harvesting and eating the bounty they provide. What a fun and positive way to weave in connections with the different seasons. A flower fort strengthens kids' connections to nature and seasonality, and provides a special place where they can play, rest, and be among plants.



BACKGROUND

Sunflower houses can be made with planted annual sunflower seeds, but using a perennial native version is a simpler, hardier way to go. The "Jerusalem artichoke" (also called sunroot, sunchoke, or earth apple) is a sunflower species native to North America. Like the sunflower, they produce small yellow flowerheads. Despite its name, Jerusalem artichokes have nothing to do with artichokes. These plants will return year after year, and provide food in the fall. They are easy to cultivate, and take care of themselves quite effectively.

Sunchokes produce a sweet tuber, which looks like a long bumpy root. The colour can range from a pale brown, beige, red, or purple colour. Historically Native Americans cultivated these tubers for food and for trade. Sunchoke tubers' ability to survive long beyond planting helped the plant spread from the middle of North America to other areas of the continent.

After the arrival of Europeans, sunchokes were sent back to Europe and became a common food enjoyed there as well. Samuel de Champlain brought domestically grown sunchokes

back to France from Cape Cod in 1605. People tend to like the tubers for their faint sweet taste (they contain fructose), and because of this they became popular, particularly in France. The tuber is also known to be called the “Canadian truffle”.

Cook the tubers as you would any root vegetable- scrubbed or peeled. They are great in a root veggie roast, as their texture is similar to potatoes.

STEPS

The sunchoke plants survive quite well on their own, and will continue to grow as long as there are some tubers in the ground. With this in mind, be sure of the location for your sunflower house before planting. If they will be planted near the rest of your garden, bear in mind the shade the sunchoke will cast on neighbouring plants: (They will likely reach about 10 feet high).

Choose a spot for your sunflower house with good soil, sun exposure, and drainage. Having a flat floor will make for a more accessible play area. Children can help choose the place (encourage them to consider a plants' needs). They can also be part of designing and shaping the dimensions of the play space. The size of the fort will dictate how many tubers you'll need to plant.

Stake out the perimeter (*remembering to leave a space for a door!), and remove any big rocks, tall weeds, thistles, branches, etc. from the inside. If you like, the inside could be covered with a mulch to make a separate, weed free, floor area.

Define the perimeter using a spade, and clear and dig up the ground with a pitchfork, spade, and hoe. Add compost into the soil for nutrients. Plant small seed tubers 4 to 5 inches deep and 16 inches apart. Adding vines, pole beans, or flowers among the plants will add a nice variety and a splash of colour to the house. Depending on what height the plants reach, some

rope may be needed to keep the circular walls of the house together.

Children can harvest the sunchoke late in the fall, but before the first hard frost. Remember to dig deep and search around, as tubers can be hiding in the soil nearly a foot down. Encourage kids to use your harvest for a meal in the kitchen. The rest can be stored in the fridge or a root cellar.

SONG

Sung to the tune of “I’m a Little Teapot”, this rhyme can be acted out. Children pretend their heads are the flowers, their body is the stem, and their arms are the leaves.

I’M A LITTLE SUNFLOWER

I’m a little sunflower look and see
Here is my stem and here are my leaves.
When the sun comes up, I turn my head.
When the sun goes down I go to bed.

SOURCES

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- www.makinglearningfun.com/themepages/SunflowerActionRhyme.htm