

Sunflower Growing Race: A Summer-Long Competition

Gardening | Spring | Ages all-ages

Plant a sunflower seed in April, and by August you might have a ten-foot giant towering over your fence. That's the magic of mammoth sunflowers — and the reason they make perfect competitors for a family growing race.

We started this tradition three years ago when our youngest kept asking why plants grow at different speeds. Instead of explaining, we handed everyone a seed packet and said: prove it. Best decision ever.

What You Need

- Mammoth sunflower seeds (one per person — grab extras in case some don't germinate)
 - Sunny spot with good drainage
 - Measuring tape or yardstick
 - Stakes and garden twine for support
 - Notebook or poster board for tracking growth
 - Watering can

You can find mammoth sunflower seeds at Family Tree Nursery locations around KC or at any big box garden center. Don't overthink the variety — just look for "mammoth" or "giant" on the packet.

How to Run the Race

Week 1 (Mid-April): Each person plants their seed about an inch deep, 2-3 feet apart. Water well. Mark each spot with the person's name on a plant marker or popsicle stick.

Weeks 2-4: Watch for sprouts. This is when kids get impatient, but germination takes 7-10 days. Once they pop up, start weekly measurements every Sunday morning (or whatever day works). Measure from ground to the highest leaf point. Write it down.

May through July: Keep measuring weekly. Water during dry spells — sunflowers are tough but they grow faster with consistent moisture. When plants hit three feet, stake them. Kansas wind will snap an unstaked sunflower without mercy.

August: Final measurement day. Tallest sunflower wins. We let the winner pick the next family activity, but you could do a trophy, extra screen time, whatever motivates your crew.

What Actually Happens

Some seeds won't sprout. Plant extras.

Someone will overwater their plant. Let it happen — they'll learn.

Heights will vary wildly. That's genetics, sun exposure, and luck. Our tallest ever hit 11 feet. Our shortest was a respectable 6.

Chipmunks and squirrels love sunflower seeds. If you're near Shawnee Mission Park or any wooded area, expect some losses. We've started covering seeds with chicken wire until they sprout.

The Payoff By August, you'll have dinner-plate-sized flowers that bring goldfinches to your yard. Let the heads dry on the stalk, then harvest seeds for roasting or replanting next spring. The winner gets bragging rights. Everyone gets a backyard full of ridiculous, cheerful giants.

