

A sunflower that likes it wet!

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Left: The swamp sunflower plant produces bright and cheerful flowers on tall flower spikes.

Many of us love the large cheerful flowers of the sunflower (*Helianthus annuus*). Besides producing showy flowers, as most of us know, the sunflower plant is a source of edible seeds that make delicious snacks for both humans and parrots. The oil found inside the kernels can also be extracted to make cooking oil.

But the beauty of the sunflower is transient. It is because the sunflower plant is an annual where the plant dies down after flowering. One has to continuously sow new seeds and raise seedlings in order to have a continuous floral show. As a garden plant, one has to remember to grow it in a sun-lit and well-draining location as the sunflower plant does not tolerate waterlogged soil conditions.

Here is a piece of good news for sunflower lovers - there is a close relative of the common sunflower, which grows as a perennial and can tolerate slightly wetter soil conditions. Visitors to HortPark should look out for a colony of *Helianthus angustifolius* that is growing at the Golden Garden, along the path leading to the Gardens by the Bay's experimental glasshouses.



Left: The swamp sunflower plant grows as a clump where new shoots emerge from the base of the plant. It is not particularly invasive.

Helianthus angustifolius is a plant that is native to the coastal swamps and wet meadows of southern New York to Florida and Texas in the United States. Because of this unique growth habit, *H. angustifolius* has earned itself a rather adept common name of the 'swamp sunflower'.

In Singapore, when grown under optimal conditions, *H. angustifolius* can be found to be flowering perpetually. It is therefore not surprising that this plant is sometimes known commonly as the perennial sunflower. The plant produces hairy, long and slender leaves and as a result of this characteristic, it is sometimes referred to as the narrow-leaved sunflower. This particular characteristic is also reflected in the plant's specific epithet, *angustifolius*.

As a plant, *H. angustifolius* is a herbaceous perennial with a fibrous root system. It sends out slim and short rhizomes from which new vegetative growth emerges close to the mother plant to form a tight clump. The plant is not particularly invasive and does not spread too quickly, contrary to what can be found on various web resources.

The erect, hairy stems of *H. angustifolius* can grow up to a height of 90 cm, with a tendency to branch in the upper portion. At the tip of each branch, several bright yellow, sunflower-like blooms, measuring up to 8 cm in diameter, and somewhat smaller than those found in *H. annuus*, are produced.



Left: Propagate the swamp sunflower plant via division. Carefully uproot a large plant and split the plant at its base.

The bright yellow colour of the flowers of *H. angustifolius* contrasts well against a lush green background, especially when grown in an outdoor landscape *en-masse*.

Cultivation

Like the common sunflower, *H. angustifolius* does best in full sun outdoors. Plants grown in less sunny areas, such as on balconies and along corridors of high-rise apartments with less exposure to direct sunshine, are likely to be less floriferous and exhibit leggier growth.

Helianthus angustifolius can grow well in both waterlogged and well-drained locations. For the latter, ensure the soil is watered thoroughly during hot and dry weather so that plants do not dry out. In severe drought, plants can die back. This plant is also suitable for container culture, as long as its water needs are met.

A heavy feeder, *H. angustifolius* requires a regular, generous application of organic fertilizer or compost to promote vigorous growth and ensure a continuous flush of new flowers.

New growth emerges frequently from the base of healthy plants and crowded plants can be carefully lifted and divided to gain more plants. In Singapore, *H. angustifolius* is found to be generally pest and disease-free, although plants can die back for no apparent reasons occasionally. Hence it is best to propagate new plants on a regular basis so as to ensure one does not lose it altogether.

Reference

Cullina, W., 2000. The New England Wild Flower Society Guide to Growing and Propagating Wildflowers of the United States and Canada: A Guide to Growing and Propagating Native Flowers of North America. Houghton Mifflin Company. USA.

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