

Sunflowers in Eldorado

(Draft pending publication)

The New Mexico sunflower is one of my favorite flowers. Every year from late June to October they bloom magnificently as solitary plants or in large patches along the roads of Eldorado. The sunflowers do a pretty good job of seeding themselves from year to year. But I have taken up the practice of harvesting the seed pods after they've bloomed and spreading the seeds up and down the street so as to increase the population. Some may argue that this is tampering with nature, and I hope those who feel this way will forgive me. But I think a case can be made that a modest increase in the sunflower population does no harm and adds beauty to our lives.

Here's what I've learned about gathering and spreading sunflower seeds. First you must harvest the seed pods after the petals have fallen off but before the pods begin to dry. If you wait too long, the seed pod dries and releases the seeds. And collecting brittle dry seedpods, as I did the first year I tried this, is tantamount to collecting no seeds at all. There are several potential methods for spreading the properly collected seed pods. The first is to scatter the pods themselves and let them release their seeds naturally. A second approach is to let them dry completely and pound them with a hammer to release the seeds. This produces a mixture of seeds and chaff that can be used more in the style of sowing wheat. In both cases, the wind and rain then take over and determine where the seeds end up and whether they germinate or not. I have found that sunflower seeds seem to like best those places where water accumulates or runs slowly during rain storms and don't seem to take so well where the incline is steeper and the water runs faster. The third method, which many, no doubt, already use is to plant the seeds in your garden as you would any other plant.

If this strikes you as something worthwhile to do, I encourage you to consider taking up the practice. Or maybe you already have and can let us know. The great thing about scattering sunflower seeds in public places is that everybody gets to enjoy them. If this practice were to become "widespread" it is not inconceivable that Eldorado could become the Sunflower Capital of NM. I can't see how that would do anything but make Eldorado an even more attractive place to live.

A final word is needed about protecting sunflowers and the other wildflowers that bloom along our roads. There are two threats which need to be properly managed.

Grading our dirt roads is a necessity, and we very much appreciate the help provided by the County employees who do this work. But if this grading is done between May and October, it can wipe out sunflowers and other flowering plants. If possible, the best policy from the point of view of preserving the plants would be to NOT grade the roads from May to October, unless emergency conditions required it. When grading is done during this period, it would be best if our friends running the graders could learn to recognize stands of sunflowers and leave them alone, not unlike the reaper who spared the stand of blossoms in Robert Frost's poem "A Tuft of Flowers."

The same is true of industrial and construction work. This year, Qwest crews destroyed long sections of the sides of Eldorado roads as they worked to lay new cable. There is no reason why this work has to be so destructive. Qwest and other companies doing work in Eldorado need to take stock of their environmental practices and find ways of working that are least damaging to the appearance of our neighborhood. Getting these companies to behave properly is something we can all contribute to, but may also require some help from our elected officials.

I hope you have found these ideas helpful. Send in a letter of note if you have comments.