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Sunflowers



Synopsis

Pappalardo's unexpected and highly entertaining social history of this scandalous flower stretches from the Stone Age to the Space Age, from its healing role in Hopi tribal rituals to its covert involvement in the Cold War.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

What do Adolf Hitler, Josef Stalin, and Osama bin Laden have in common? OK, besides the obvious. Would you believe sunflowers? Ironical, isn't it, that this cheerful symbol of nature's purity and wholesome goodness has influenced plans for world domination wrought by modern history's most reviled despots? Few know that Hitler's invasion of Russia was largely motivated by a desire to deprive Stalin of a crucial source of cooking oil, or that bin Laden calculatedly established his nascent al-Qaeda in the Sudan through the creation of sunflower-oil production facilities. Fascinating as such arcana is, however, it's secondary to the trove of entertaining lore Pappalardo spins throughout his engaging and expansive look at a flower so ubiquitous that its critical role in cultural development since the dawn of time often goes overlooked. A glib, upbeat writer and fiercely determined researcher, Pappalardo intrepidly investigates everything from the sunflower's genetic history and recent bioengineering discoveries to its influence on global economies from the U.S. to Uganda. --Carol Haggas

"There is a time in every author's relationship with a topic when he crosses the line into obsession," says the affable Joe Pappalardo, who seems to find sunflowers everywhere: He claims Hitler invaded Russia because he wanted the country's sunflower oil and notes that another form of the weed, the Jerusalem artichoke, was rejected as a food source in 17th-century Europe (which is unfortunate, since its use could have averted the Irish potato famine). Though some of Pappalardo's interview subjects in *Sunflowers* exude a standard scholarly dryness, Pappalardo himself does not in this lively, compulsively readable account. B+ -- Entertainment Weekly, March 21, 2008

I read this book on a long flight and could not put it down! Who would of thought a book about flowers would be filled with so much history and drama?! From Native Americans to Peter the Great, from Italian oil empires to Wisconsin festivals, this book makes you appreciate the impact the flower has had on humankind from prehistoric times. Another interesting aspect of the book is the perspective of the botanists studying it as a natural hybridizer. The science part of this book is full of intrigue. The economic and political impact of sunflower oil as a commodity is also interesting. The question becomes, "why aren't we planting sunflowers any where in the world people are hungry?" A truly fascinating read!

This book is a relatively narrow academic discourse on sunflower history intended for those who already have a good knowledge of the sunflower plant. As a general reader, this book did not hold my interest very well. The author has done his homework quite well and does incorporate some interesting human encounters, but the perpetual name dropping of obscure researchers and their penchant for publications is distracting. Another issue probably not a fault of the author is the poor, black-and-white quality of the photography for something as colorful as a sunflower is disappointing.

I was really excited to buy this book. I began reading it and learned some interesting facts about sunflowers. This book is more academic than fun reading! The picture in the front is a bit deceiving. If you are into books about research and lots of details you will enjoy this book. If you are looking for a light read, this is not the book for you!

Fascinating read!

A terrific book with lots of wonderful hard to find sunflower information!!! Glad to have found it and will share it!

Learned so much!

The theme my granddaughter wanted for Christmas was anything sunflower. I found this book and since she loves history she was so excited. The book was great and the service was wonderful. It is so nice not to have to pay shipping.

Review of sunflowers the secret history by Joe Pappalardo
CITATION: Pappalardo, J. (2008).
Sunflowers the secret history: the unauthorised biography of the world's most beloved weed. Woodstock & New York: The Overlook Press.
Reviewer: William P. Palmer
I purchased the book for its fascinating title and the interesting description of it on the book jacket. In the end I was a little disappointed, though the book is full of amazing facts about sunflowers. The author informs his readers that Linnaeus named the species Helianthus (Helios means sun and anthus-flower) and named eleven different species. Sir Walter Raleigh had brought the sunflower root from North America to Europe, more commonly known as the Jerusalem artichoke (Helianthus tuberosus) and this could be an alternative to the potato. The seeds from the head of the sunflower are arranged according to the Fibonacci sequence 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, 55, 89, 144 Usually 55 seeds around the spiral twist one way and 34 the other way though different combinations are found. The book is mainly concerned with the people who have researched into sunflowers in order to provide different varieties of sunflower to promote genetic research into overcoming the various plant pests to which sunflowers are susceptible and to increase yields. Economically sunflower seeds are used for making sunflower oil which can be hydrogenated to provide margarine. Evidently huge tracts of the Soviet Union (Russia) were used in sunflower oil production and this may have been a factor in Hitler's decision to invade Russia. We learn that Fargo in North Dakota is the main centre for growing sunflowers in the United States and that various projects in Africa (Mozambique and Uganda) are encouraging the growth of sunflowers in these countries as they are an excellent source of nutrition. Even Osama bin Laden tried his hand at sunflower production as a way of encouraging Sudan to carry out business there. Overall it is a book that wanders around the topic, is dull in places, but which provides useful information about sunflowers.
BILL PALMER

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