

Ask a Master Gardener Article, November 25, 2014

Do Sunflower Seed Hulls Harm Other Plants?

by Shelly Murphy, Carroll County Master Gardener and Extension Volunteer

Q. My husband feeds black oil sunflower seeds to birds (and squirrels) year round by our patio. The hulls pile up in my flower bed under his feeder. He refuses to clean up what he calls “free mulch.” A friend says it is the reason I can't get anything to grow there. I got so mad last fall when the squirrels his seeds attract dug up and ate my pricey tulip bulbs, I wanted to divorce him. Do sunflower seed hulls harm other plants? Can they be composted?

A. Who knew seemingly innocent backyard hobbies could qualify a couple for a “Can this marriage be saved” episode on Dr. Phil? But so it is when a passionate gardener and an avid bird feeder share common turf.

I, too, have heard that black oil sunflower seed hulls will kill every plant they touch. I also have an obstinate husband whose welfare has supported generations of birds and squirrels in several states. Although I have not suffered many casualties yet, perennials under the dogwood tree where he hangs his feeders tend to struggle. Part of the problem may be the hard-packed clay soil in which they are planted, the dense shade they receive until mid-afternoon when the blazing sun assaults them, and the slacker in charge of watering. But I agree this “free mulch” does my plants more harm than good.

Information to substantiate this claim from reliable sources was disappointing. The National Sunflower Institute and several state extension websites provided details on how to grow the plants and the nutritional value of the seeds for both wildlife and humans, as well as disease and insect issues. But hull waste was not mentioned.

Blogs from bird feeding gardeners varied. One or two successfully used hulls as mulch for shrubs such as roses. Another used them to mulch garden paths. A few added them to their compost heap but said they decomposed more slowly than other matter. The majority of these voices of experience claimed sunflower plants, seeds and hulls should never be used as mulch or in compost because they contain chemicals that harm other plants and kill grass.

One blogger did cite an article in American Horticulture Magazine (July, 2011) confirming all parts of the sunflower plant contain a chemical thought to prevent germination of seeds and inhibit growth in some plants. The general consensus seems to be that some plants grow in sunflower hull waste better than others, namely seeds and seedlings.

George Weigel, a Pennsylvania Certified Horticulturist and journalist, claims the sunflower has natural plant chemicals (sesquiterpene lactones) which serve as a defense mechanism for fending off competitors trying to grow in its territory. It works well enough that scientists have researched sunflowers as a herbicide for weed prevention. Some even claim it will inhibit poison ivy growth.

American sunflower processing plants typically bury hull waste. However, in Turkey, where sunflowers are a major crop, hull waste is being used to make a strong, light-weight concrete.

I will gladly share what worked at our house. After years of begrudgingly cleaning up my husband's bird feeder waste in my garden, I convinced him to buy shelled sunflower seeds and suet coated with red pepper. *Voila!* Problem solved. No more hull mess and the squirrels have vanished. While these rodents cannot tolerate spicy hot cuisine, birds are not adversely affected. Though a purchase does dent the wallet, the smaller bag is easier to handle and lasts longer. For certain it is cheaper than a divorce.

You could take a “can't lick 'em, join 'em” approach and grow sunflowers under the feeder. Planted in full sun in warmer climates, bloom occurs in 80-120 days. By mid-summer you can enjoy sunny blossoms from your patio. At season's end, the birds can dine on the flowers and you won't have to buy as many seeds.

To be honest, I sort of miss the bushy-tailed acrobats in our yard. Their contorted antics accessing those “squirrel-proof” feeders was amazing. They were often more entertaining than the birds. I also worry these critters won't survive winter in the wild, after subsisting on the Murphys' free Smorgasboard since birth. Indeed—I may have to rethink this issue.

For answers to any gardening questions, contact a Master Gardener Extension Volunteer at 770-836-8546, via e-mail at ccmg@uga.edu or visit our office in the Ag Center at 900 Newnan Road in Carrollton.