

## ***Helianthus debilis***

(heel-ee-ANTH-us DEB-bil-liss)

**Beach sunflower; dune sunflower**

**Family: Asteraceae**



Daisy-like flowers of beach sunflower.

### **Beach sunflower**

**Origin:** Florida; along U.S. Gulf coast to Texas

**U.S.D.A. Zone:** 8-11 (down to 10°F)

**Growth Rate:** Fast

**Flowering Months:** Year-round in south Florida, summer in northern Florida

**Leaf Persistence:** Semi-evergreen

**Salt Tolerance:** High

**Drought Tolerance:** High

**Nutritional Requirements:** Low

**Potential Pests:** None serious

**Typical Dimensions:** 2'-4' by 2'-4'

**Propagation:** Seeds; cuttings

**Human Hazards:** None known

**Uses:** Groundcover; butterfly attractant; border; mass planting; cascading down a wall; dune stabilizer; edging



Beach sunflower is a fast-growing groundcover.

The beach sunflower is a highly salt-tolerant plant that thrives in sandy, well-drained soil in full sun. It can be found growing naturally on sand dunes and with native vines and grasses. It spreads by above-ground stems and by seeds. The stems are easily rooted wherever they touch ground. Under adequate growing conditions, it becomes a shrubby groundcover of about two to four feet tall. Heavy summer rains, especially in poorly drained soils, promote root rot, defoliation, and elongated stems. In south Florida, plant from February into December. Select smaller plants preferable from 4 inch pots or from liners. Smaller plants grow faster, bloom more profusely, and usually live longer than older plants from larger containers. Space plants 36 to 48 inches apart. Plants can be firmed into the soil through mulch no more than 3 inches deep. Rampant growth occurs in the summer with one plant growing to cover an area as large as 8' by 8'. One or two applications of fertilizer during the year will encourage plants to establish and cover the ground quickly. Once established no fertilizer is needed. Established plants will bloom continually for about two years at which time they become woody, "leggy," and exhausted. During that time, quarterly removal of dead and dying stems will help to keep the plants looking their best. If not, a light clipping just before the rainy season may help to rejuvenate plants. At about two years, declining plants can be easily uprooted. This exposes seeds to sunlight and encourages the growth of a new generation of seedlings. These seedlings will cover the exposed area within a few weeks. Seeds will germinate atop mulch. The plant has irregularly toothed leaves, growing opposite or alternating on the stem. Cont. on page 3.



**Leaf type:** Simple  
**Leaf shape:** Deltoid  
**Leaf blade length:** 2 to 4 inches  
**Leaf arrangement:** Alternate and opposite



**Flower color:** Yellow corolla (petals) with black disk  
**Flower arrangement:** Single  
**Corolla type:** Composite  
**Diameter:** 2.5 inches or more  
**Flower position:** Slightly nodding  
**Flower characteristic:** Year-round flowering in south Florida, summer in northern Florida  
**Fruit:** small kernels with an oily seed wall



Cont. from page 2.

The bright yellow daisy-like flowers can be enjoyed year-round; however, peak display can be expected in fall, winter, and spring. Dead-heading will encourage flower production but is not necessary for a pleasing display. The flowers are a nectar source for butterflies and when dry, the flower heads produce small black seeds that germinate readily. The flowers and seeds were used by Native Americans to produce pale green and purple-black colors, for body painting and dyeing textiles, pottery, and baskets. Subspecies naturally occurring in Florida include *debilis* on the east coast and *vestitus* on the west coast. The former, *Helianthus debilis* subsp. *debilis* is the subspecies universally cultivated in Florida. This accounts for its extensive spread outside its native east coast range and up and down the west coast of Florida. Subspecies *debilis* hybridization with subspecies *vestitus* may cause the latter to go extinct.



**Plant type:** Perennial in south Florida  
**Light requirement:** Full sun  
**Soil tolerance:** Acidic; alkaline; sand; loam  
**Drought tolerance:** High  
**Soil Salt tolerance:** High  
**Salt spray tolerance:** High  
**Plant habit:** Spreading  
**Spread:** 2 to 8 feet  
**Plant spacing:** 36 to 48 inches  
**Pests and diseases:** Not usually of concern but can include the following leaf and stem diseases: *Alternaria sp.*; Anthracnose; *Botrytis sp.*, powdery mildew and Pythium root rot  
**Invasive potential:** Subsp. *debilis* has spread at the expense of subsp. *Vestitus*.



This fact sheet was reviewed by Cathy Feser, Collier County Extension Agent; Joy Hazell, Lee County Marine Agent; John Sibley, Lee County Master Gardener; Peggy Cruz, Lee County horticulture specialist; Jenny Evans, Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation; Al O'Donnell, O'Donnell Landscapes and Keith Bradley, Institute for Regional Conservation, Miami.

The Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) is an Equal Opportunity Institution authorized to provide research, educational information, and other services only to individuals and institutions that function without discrimination with respect to race, creed, color, religion, age, disability, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, national origin, political opinions, or affiliations. USDA, UF/IFAS Extension, FAMU and Boards of County Commissioners Cooperating.