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A family consisting of a man, a woman, and a young girl are walking away from the camera down a dirt path through a field of tall sunflowers. The sunflowers are in sharp focus in the foreground, while the family is slightly out of focus. In the background, there are rolling green hills under a clear sky. The man is wearing a white shirt and jeans, the woman is wearing a pink and white striped shirt and jeans, and the girl is wearing a pink shirt and black shorts.

first LIGHT



Going for Gold

Plunge into a sea of sunflowers at Vermont's Billings Farm & Museum.

BY JENN JOHNSON

Of all the possible locations for engagement photos—orchards, covered bridges, ocean beaches—the workplace usually doesn't rank high on the list. Unless, that is, you can step outside your office into a wonderland of sunflowers.

As director of education and interpretation at Billings Farm & Museum, Christine Scales had exactly that opportunity in the form of the Sunflower House: a display of hundreds of red, orange, and gold blooms that's said to be the largest of its kind in the nation. Launched in 2019, it's become a summer sensation at the four-decade-old outdoor history museum in Woodstock, Vermont, attracting media coverage, flocks of visitors, and yes, professional photo sessions.

"It's so joyful, it's just impossible to take a bad picture in there," says Scales, who had her own engagement portraits taken in the Sunflower House in 2020. "We've had people book it for maternity photos, family photos ... and we even had two wedding proposals in the Sunflower House, both successful."

Fittingly, this fairy-tale garden has a bit of magic in its origins. A children's book featured in Billings's preschool story-hour program, Eve Bunting's *The Sunflower House*, had gotten the museum staff thinking about creating their own sunflower house—a simple eight-foot circle of flowers that could be a living play space for kids, maybe, like the one in the book. Then came a fateful meeting with Ben Pauly, director of property operations and design at the Woodstock Inn & Resort.

"We had gotten together with Ben to talk about a new garden shed we were putting in at Billings, and we happened to ask if he'd ever

Full of living "rooms" and "hallways" and roofed by the Vermont summer sky, the Sunflower House at Billings Farm & Museum marks its sixth anniversary this year.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: An aerial view of the 2022 Sunflower House at Billings Farm & Museum, looking toward the animal barns and 1890 Farm Manager's House; Ben Pauly, director of property operations and design at the Woodstock Inn & Resort; the puffy blooms of Gouldy Doubles, just one of the 130-plus sunflower varieties that have appeared in versions of the Sunflower House since 2019.



heard of a sunflower house before," Scales recalls. "And he didn't say anything at first—he just pulled out a folder full of pictures of sunflower houses and his whole plan for creating one. And on a much larger scale than what we were originally picturing."

Pauly, it turned out, had already been mulling a showstopping new garden project at Billings Farm & Museum, which like the Woodstock Inn is owned and operated by the nonprofit Woodstock Foundation. "Some may have thought that a corn maze would be the better thing to do—to make a

big impact, to bring people to Woodstock. It's a classic Vermont fall attraction," says Pauly. "But my feeling was: Nobody else has a sunflower house."

Besides, he adds, a maze is all about finding your way *out*. "But a house is something you want to inhabit; you want to be a part of it and feel comfortable and experience everything around you."

Working with the idea of creating "rooms" and "hallways" in a living structure, Pauly designed and planted the first Sunflower House for summer 2019. Set on a quarter acre and featur-

ing about a dozen kinds of sunflowers, the result made a big impression. "It was this beautiful, amazing, magical thing," Scales recalls. "When I saw it for the first time, I immediately thought, *Yeah, people are going to want to come to see this. They're going to come from all over to see this.*"

As popular as it was the first year, the Sunflower House boomed the next, when the need for outdoor, socially distant activities saw people streaming to places like Billings. And the crowds were back in 2021 to experience an even bigger iteration of the Sunflower House that sprawled over nearly half an acre; that year marked a new record for museum attendance.



The 2024 Sunflower House, which is expected to peak in late August or early September, is laden with more than 50 varieties ranging in height from 12 inches to 14 feet and bearing names like Lemon Cutie, Just Crazy, and Starburst Panache. Rounding out the 20,000-square-foot installation by Pauly and Taylor Hiers, a fellow Woodstock Inn master gardener, are 50 "sunflower buddies"—zinnias, marigolds, etc.—to expand the color palette and extend the bloom time.

Like the sunflowers, the companion plants are all annuals. So after this year's Sunflower House dies down, a completely new one will rise next year. It's a structure that's not meant to last, but it does serve a lasting purpose: to nourish the birds and bees, and to provide visitors with garden memories that will never fade. billingsfarm.org

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