Name _____

Wild Sunflowers, Wonderful New Traits

Wild sunflowers grow in the strangest places—just ask Tom Gulya and Gerald Seiler. They're scientists who collect the seeds of wild sunflowers from all across the United States. Their collections help keep farm-grown sunflowers healthy.

In Colorado, Tom and Gerald noticed wild sunflowers growing beside a McDonald's restaurant parking lot. In Southern California, they found a vine-like sunflower clinging to shifting sand dunes.

Tom and Gerald collect wild sunflowers once or twice a year. They usually end up driving 2,500 to 3,000 miles on each trip—much of that on country roads.

They like to travel in August and September. That's when the plant's seeds are fully developed and still attached to the plant.

Wild sunflowers are important because they are different from farm-grown sunflowers in useful ways. For example, some farm-grown sunflowers aren't very good at fighting off new diseases or insect pests. But some kinds of wild sunflowers are attacked all the time and survive.

Being able to fight off disease is a *trait* of these wild sunflowers. Trait is a word that scientists use to describe what makes one plant different from other plants. Being able to grow with very little water is a trait of plants that live in the desert. Being able to grow well in a shady area is a trait of plants that grow on the forest floor.

Wild sunflowers have different traits than farm-grown sunflowers. That makes them very valuable to farmers and scientists who want to grow new kinds of sunflowers.