

ONIONS (A Ilium Cepa)



Onions through history

Gardeners have grown onions since ancient days. In the days of the Pharaohs, Egypt was famed for the mildness of its onions. The choice of varieties extends from the satiny, globular-rooted Bermuda type to the cylindrical leek.

The proper soil for onions

Onions are relatively easy to grow provided the garden soil is rich, fertile and reasonably well drained. The topsoil should be deep and should contain an ample supply of humus. If the soil is exceptionally sandy or very heavy, incorporate well-rotted horse manure, leaves or other organic material the season before planting. Dry soil will cause onions to "split," forming two small bulbs instead of normal growth.

The use of lime may be necessary to offset excess soil acidity. If finely crushed limestone is used, this may be incorporated in the soil at any time previous to planting.

The planting and culture of onions

Onions can be propagated by small bulbs known as sets, by seed or by transplants. The easiest and often the fastest method for the home gardener is sets, but seed are less expensive and better for large-scale plantings.

Sets:

These dwarf onion bulbs have been grown from seed planted very thickly within the rows. They are usually of the Ebenezer type, although other white-, brown- and red-skinned varieties are available. Contrary to the beliefs of many gardeners, the best sets are not necessarily the largest. The preferred size is about 1/2 inch in diameter, with smaller ones lacking in vigor and larger sets often going to seed.

You will find that it pays to plant sets carefully, stem end up. Place them four to six inches apart in the row and cover them with 1/4 inch sifted compost. Water well and firm the soil. One pound of sets is enough for 50 feet of row.

Planted as early in the spring as possible, the sets will grow rapidly. They demand only shallow cultivation or weeding. By five weeks the young plants should have made good growth. If pulled at this stage they are scallions or green bunching onions.

Seed:

Onions grown from seed mature in about 130 days but offer a much wider range of varieties than those grown from sets. Seed longevity, however, is only one year. One ounce of seed is sufficient for 100 feet of row. Seed should be in the ground just as early as possible, even before the last frost. It should be planted thickly and evenly in a shallow drill, covered with 1/2 inch of sifted compost and firmed. Careful weeding of the rows and the same general care should be given as for onions grown from sets.

Plants:

Because of the necessity for an early start so that the plants may be benefited by the long daylight hours and mature before the arrival of summer drought, many gardeners purchase young plants. But to obtain fine young plants, true to type and free from disease, you may decide to grow your own seedlings with the aid of a cold frame. You will then be in a position to transplant the seedlings to the garden the minute the ground is in a condition to receive them.

Bulb formation:

The length of time needed to form edible bulbs is determined by the amount of daylight the plant receives and not by the maturity of the plant.

This explains why some types of onions form bulbs in certain localities and not in others. There are onions which form bulbs when receiving only 12 hours of daylight daily (Yellow Bermuda and White Creole, for example). Ebenezer and Yellow Globe Danvers require 13 hours of daylight each day to bulb. Such types as Red Wethersfield require as much as 14 hours.

Insect control for onions

The average garden-grown onion is relatively free from plant disease and insect pests, although the onion root maggot can be troublesome in some localities until the garden soil has been properly conditioned by the liberal use of properly composted organic humus. As a deterrent, some gardeners have found that radishes interplanted between rows of onions act as a very satisfactory trap crop. The onion root maggot prefers the radish root and infests it instead of the onion. When they become infested, pull up the radishes and destroy them.

The full-grown onion maggot is legless, pearly white and about 1/3 inch long. The body tapers to a point at the head. This insect is very similar to the cabbage maggot.

The onion maggot seldom attacks any crop except onions, but it will attack them throughout the growing season. Onions planted for sets are more susceptible than large onions; white varieties are more likely to be damaged than yellow ones and red varieties are least likely to be damaged.

Damage is most severe when the onions are small. One maggot is capable of destroying many seedlings by destroying their underground parts, whereas a single large onion may harbor several maggots without being destroyed. The maggot damage to onion seedlings not only reduces the stand but causes the remaining plants to be less uniform in size. This lack of uniformity is of considerable importance when onion sets are grown.

The maggots usually gain entrance to larger onions near the base where they attack the roots and sometimes burrow upward as much as two inches. When damaged onions are put into storage, they decay and cause sound bulbs to rot. A layer of sand added to the top layer of soil will deter onion maggots. Cull onions, if planted in intervals, will attract the maggot and prevent damage to the main crop.

The onion thrips is slender, light yellow to brown, very active, and almost too small to be seen with the naked eye. Onion thrips feed on onions, beans, cabbage, and on a large number of other crops and weeds.

This insect, unlike most others, scrapes the surface of a leaf with its mouthparts and laps up the sap that flows from the wounded tissue. Small whitish blotches appear where thrips have fed. Heavily infested plants become stunted, the leaves become bleached and die back from the tips, abnormally thick necks are produced, and the bulbs fail to develop normally.

It is not uncommon for large fields of onions to be destroyed by onion thrips during July and August. Injury is most severe during hot, dry seasons.

Harvesting onions

Onion sets mature in about 100 days and, as the plants approach maturity, the tops gradually fall to the ground. When most of the tops are down, the remainder are generally broken down by running the back of a rake over them. A day or two later the onions should be pulled and left on the surface of the ground to cure. They are then gathered and the tops clipped off about an inch from the bulb.

To complete their curing, spread them loosely in a shed or airy lean-to where they may dry until cold weather arrives. To store for the winter, place onions in orange crates, net bags or other ventilated containers and move to a cool, dry cellar. If you lack a storage cellar, onions in open containers may be stored in some airy place, such as an attic. Provided they are dry, slight freezing does not injure them, although they should not be handled while frozen.

Varieties of onions

Ebenezer is usually grown from sets and matures in 105 days. Sweet Spanish Hybrid is a high yielder with a mild flavor. Yellow Bermuda has a growing period of 95 days and produces mild, medium-sized bulbs. Another early variety is Crystal White Wax which matures in 95 days. It is a favorite in the South. Evergreen Long White Bunching has a long growing period of 120 days. It is produced in clusters and used for scallions.