



How to Grow Onions in the

EDIBLE GARDEN



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Onions add wonderful flavour and aroma to fresh and cooked dishes and are one of the most popular plants in the edible garden. They may be grown from seeds or sets, depending on the gardener's preference. Here are some tips to harvest a bounty of large, healthy, and delicious onions!

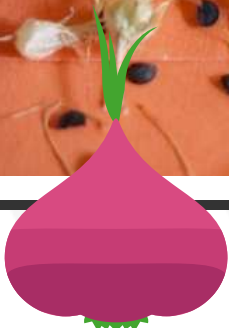


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Onion sets are onion bulbs that are not fully mature. They germinate quickly and yield harvestable plants in less time than onions from seeds, so they are good choices for short-season gardens. Unfortunately, if you choose to plant sets, you have more limited options when it comes to cultivar selection than you do with seeds. When growing onion sets, resist the temptation to purchase sets containing large bulbs. This is one case where smaller is much better and will actually yield bigger onions in the long run.

Seeds take a long time to germinate (usually between 2 and 3 weeks) and many gardeners in cold climates may wish to start them indoors approximately two months before planting the seedlings out into the garden. There is another advantage of starting seeds early: Onion plants prefer moderate temperatures and in the heat of summer, they may set small bulbs that refuse to grow larger. This can be prevented by sowing them indoors for transplant, and giving them that extra growing time out of extreme heat. (Likewise, deep cold isn't good for onions and they may not form bulbs at all) .

You can occasionally find onions available as transplants in the garden centre in early spring – if you don't want to start the seeds or sets yourself, this can be a good option. Be sure to harden off your onion seedlings before transplanting them out into the garden. They need to acclimatize to the more exposed, harsher conditions. Place the seedlings outdoors during the day, in a location sheltered from direct heat and drying winds. Bring them inside at night. Gradually increase the amount of hours the plants are outside over a period of approximately one to two weeks. By the end of this timeframe, they should be able to stay out all day and all night.



Sowing Onions

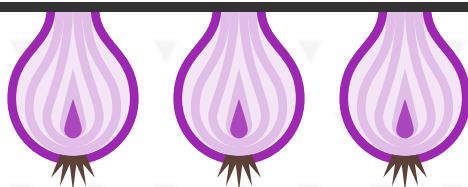


Onion seeds prefer warm soils for optimum germination. A soil temperature of at least 10°C is ideal; otherwise, they could take longer than usual to sprout. Amend the planting bed with a 2.5 centimetre layer of compost before sowing onion seeds or sets. After the seedlings have grown at least two sets of true leaves, you can fertilize with a diluted (quarter strength) application of liquid fish emulsion or kelp; as the growing season goes on, you can give them half strength applications every two to three weeks.

For larger onions, give your seedlings room to grow. 5 to 8 centimetres apart is recommended. The very small seeds should be sown approximately 1 centimetre deep. If you find your seedlings are spaced too closely, you can always thin (remove) a few once they come up. Make sure you eat these little onions – they can be used like scallions (green onions)!

During times of little to no rain, you can irrigate your onion crop with 2.5 centimetres of water once per week. If it is extremely hot and dry, you may need to water more than once per week. Check the soil to see if it is dry before you add water. Onions will rot in boggy conditions; too much moisture is never a good idea.

Sometimes onions will bolt (flower, then go to seed). They tend to do this most often when the temperatures hit either extreme of too hot or too cold. Once they've bolted, you can cut the flowers off, but the bulbs will not grow any larger. They will also store very poorly, so it's best to harvest them and eat them right away. They will still taste delicious, they just won't be the size you were hoping for. Some cultivars tend to bolt more easily than others; look for bolt-resistant types when you purchase your seeds or sets.



Growing Onions in Containers

Scallions, which are grown for their tops, are excellent crops for containers, as they don't take up much room and they can be mixed into groupings of other vegetables or even ornamental flowering plants. Plant onion sets or transplants into a container mix composed of loam, peat or coir, and compost. Remember that containers tend to dry out more readily than in-ground or raised beds, so be sure to maintain a regular watering schedule, particularly in hot, dry weather. To keep the plants from becoming too wet, the container should have excellent drainage. Site the containers in a sunny location and enjoy having green onions close at hand to harvest whenever you want!

Harvesting and Storage of Onions



Bulb-forming onions are ready to harvest when their green tops turn yellow and fall over. You can, of course, pull up a few small bulbs before then and enjoy them throughout the summer. You can even harvest a few greens early in the season as well, but don't remove all of the tops of any one plant as they need the leaves to photosynthesize and grow that delicious bulb!

In order to store onions over the long-term, you need to cure them. Spread the bulbs out on a layer of newspapers in a warm location, preferably outdoors, for a week. Shelter them so that they don't get rained on. After this time, they should have a dry exterior ready for storing.

Store onions in mesh bags in a dry, cool, area (at a temperature of about 7°C). They will last several months in storage, but it is always a good idea to check them periodically to ensure they are not rotting. Remember, some cultivars store better than others – look for this characteristic when you order your sets or seeds from your favourite seed company.

Onion tops (greens) may be consumed fresh right away. They are easily dehydrated and may be subsequently powdered. They also freeze well. Onion bulbs may be diced finely and dehydrated, or chopped and froze for later use. They can be roasted or cooked into many types of dishes and frozen for later consumption. Everything from soup to stew benefits from an onion!

