



How to Grow Onions

Onions are such a familiar mainstay in the kitchen, which means they are constantly in demand. They are easy to grow with a long storage life and one of the best vegetables for the home gardener. With a little planning, they can be available for nearly all year round eating.

The three ways most common ways to grow onions are:

Maincrop onion seed or sets - sown or planted starting in March, depending on your garden's location. If they are sown under cloche protection, they can be sown four weeks earlier.

Japanese variety of onion seed or sets - sown or planted outside in early September for pulling in late June.

Salad or Spring Onions – sown at three week intervals from March to July for pulling from June to October. Sown in August you will get a crop March to May.



Plant to Harvest Time:
Spring onions 11 weeks
Onion from seed 24 weeks
Onion from sets 20 weeks
Japanese onions 46 weeks



GROWING TIPS

All onions grow best in a sunny position with a rich light, well-drained soil; however they will do well in most soils as long as it is firm. Onions are ideal plants for growing in small confined spaces; they particularly thrive in raised beds. Prepare for sowing or planting, well in advance December time is fine for maincrop onions, June is best for Japanese onions. Dig the soil to 45cm (18in) deep, working in garden compost or other available organic matter. Pots and troughs should be at least 15cm deep and filled with good potting compost, preferably one which is soil-based such as John Innes No. 3. Onions like a firm bed with a pH of between 6 and 7 so tread over the area you have just raked and add a little garden lime if soil is to acid. Remember if the soil starts sticking to your footwear in large sticky lumps then it is still too wet, wait for another day.

Once seedlings emerge, keep them weed-free - their narrow upright leaves cannot smother any competitors. Water in dry spells, directing it to the base of the plants, not onto the foliage, as damp leaves encourage disease. Plants in containers need regular watering -never let them dry out.

In subsequent years, sow or plant onions on a different patch of ground (or change the compost in containers) to help avoid root diseases. Let the onion bed rotate with the rest of the vegetable garden.



GROWING FROM SEED VERSUS SETS.

Growing from sets has the advantage of ease although there are only a few varieties and they rarely make the biggest onions. Sets ripen earlier than seed grown plants and also make good sized onions, as long as you give them enough space. Sets also suffer less from onion fly damage than the spring grown seedlings. Many grow from sets planted in the autumn but they can also be planted in spring as precaution against winter damage. Autumn planted sets usually perform best, unless the winter turns out to be very wet.

Spring planted sets are often considerably smaller at harvest time and more prone to becoming wide necked. Crops like these should be eaten fresh, as they do not store well and are prone to onion neck disease. Eating the flesh is not a bad thing as the green leaves are delicious in a stir fry and the fleshy bulb is extremely tasty.

SOWING MAINCROP ONION SEEDS

Sow maincrop onion seeds as soon as conditions allow from early March/April for an August /September crop or under a cloche or glass four weeks earlier. Sow the onion seeds very thinly into drills 13mm(1/2") deep, in rows 23cm(9") apart. Carefully cover the onion seed with soil and gently water in. Germination will take approximately 21 days.

Seeds sown early, under cover in individual cells can be moved out later, in which case the care needed to plant out the tiny onions is quite demanding.

Thin out your onion seedlings when they are standing vertical to about 25 -50mm apart and then again later to 10cm apart. It's important to clear the thinnings away from the onion bed so not to attract the onion fly.

PLANTING ONION SETS

These are small immature onions raised by specialist growers from seed one year and planted by gardeners the next spring to grow into mature plants. Onion sets are not as demanding as seed and convenient for those new to gardening.

When you purchase your onion sets empty them into a tray if you are not planting immediately and keep in a cool, light place to prevent premature sprouting. Cut off any excess dead growth from the growing tip so this doesn't become a handle for birds to pull them out of the ground.

Prepare the onion bed as for onion seeds but they don't need the same high organic content or the fine tilth for sowing.

Plant out your onion sets mid March to mid April... 10cm apart with 23cm between rows. Make a small hole in the soil with a trowel then pop you onion set in so the growing tip is just below the surface and firm the soil around it. Water in.

SOWING SPRING (SALAD) ONION SEEDS

Spring onions should be sown from March to July in short rows 13mm deep and 10cm between rows. Thin them out to 25mm if you want more developed salad onions but it is not necessary. Sowings should be repeated every three weeks so that you have a supply for your salads throughout June to October.





HARVESTING AND PREPARING ONIONS FOR STORAGE

The onion bulb is mature when the foliage turns yellow and tips over. When the necks of onions bend over, the flow of food from the leaves to the bulb is reduced and the onions won't grow much more that year. Years ago everyone always used to suggest speeding up the ripening process by bending the foliage over at the neck. Fewer people do this now, believing it is far better to gently but firmly ease the bulbs from the soil to break the roots which will also stop further growth. Do this when the foliage is just starting to turn yellow. The bulbs can be left on the soil surface to dry out completely in the sunshine. It is essential to get the root end of the bulb clear of the soil for them to dry rapidly so space them well apart.

If the weather is wet with a chance of more than a brief shower, you should collect up the onions and shallots and lay them out in a tray in a warm dry place, such as a greenhouse or cold frame. Once they dry you can clean off the soil and tidy up the tops ready to store the bulbs in a cool, dry place for use during winter. Do make sure they are thoroughly dry before you store them.

The most convenient way to store your onions is to create an onion rope. Just take a stout piece string or twine and tie the two ends together to form a loop. Hang it from a support so it dangles then proceed to tie the onions into it by plaiting the dried foliage around the string. You can also use trays, net bags or even a pair of ladies tights

COMMON ONION PESTS & DISEASES

ONION FLY

The onion fly resembles the house fly and lays its eggs in the soil near to the onion plants. When the grubs emerge they burrow into the onion bulbs and eat them away. Maincrop onions from spring sowings are the most likely to be affected around May/June time but problems can occur right up to September. Onions grown from sets are less vulnerable - these are always the best option if you just intend to eat and not show your onion plants.

Signs of attack are yellow drooping leaves. Pull up infected plants and burn them or ensure they are destroyed. Do not leave thinnings hanging around as these, disturbed roots and leaves will attract further onions flies.

EELWORM

Look like minute transparent eels but are invisible to the naked eye. An infected bulb could contain millions of these pests. If they are present in the soil when planting your onions then secretions from the onion plants roots cause the cysts to come to life, the eelworms will then burrow into the onion bulb and up into the stem. The foliage and stems become distorted, the bulbs swollen and soft. Burn all affected plants and do not grow onions on that piece of ground for five years - beans, strawberries and peas are affected too.

NECK ROT

Grey mould appears near the neck of onions that are being stored so the bulbs become soft and rot. There is a greater risk of the fungus developing if the onion bulbs have been damaged, whilst hoeing for example, or have not been allowed to properly dry out after harvesting and are then stored in a damp and poorly ventilated area.

WHITE ROT

Hot, dry summers may encourage this growth on your onions. The leaves turn yellow, the bulbs rot and the base of the onion is covered with a growth of whitish/grey fungus with round black bodies appearing within the fungus. There is no treatment except to lift and burn diseased plants. White rot is a serious disease so don't grow onions on that piece of ground for eight years.