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Seeds for Africa

Onion

Start seeds indoors 8 to 10 weeks before the last expected frost (see "How to Start Vegetable Seeds Indoors").

Choose a site that gets at least 6 hours of sun a day and has soil with a pH of 6.0 to 7.5. Onions need moderately fertile soil that is well-drained but retains moisture. Digging in plenty of compost before you plant will ensure the right combination.

Till the soil to a depth of at least 8 inches to allow good bulb development, and remove all traces of weeds - they can easily overtake young onion plants.

Deter cutworms and maggots - the onion's archenemies - by adding parasitic nematodes to the planting area. You can buy them through mail-order catalogs and at many nurseries.

Harden off transplants, whether store-bought or homegrown, and move them to the garden two to three weeks before the last expected frost.

Set plants into the ground slightly deeper than they were growing in their pots, spacing them 2 to 6 inches apart, depending on how big the mature bulbs will be. (Check the seed packet or a comprehensive gardening book for details.)

Cover the seedlings with floating row covers to keep maggot flies from laying eggs. Weed frequently, taking care not to disturb fragile onion roots.

Feed plants with compost tea (see "How to Make Compost Tea") three times: three weeks after planting, again when the tops are 6 inches tall, and finally when the bulbs begin to swell. Avoid fertilizers high in nitrogen; they encourage lush tops and tiny bulbs.

Cover bulbs lightly with compost or other organic mulch if they start pushing out of the ground. The exposed surfaces are prone to sunscald.

Provide about an inch of water a week until the tops begin to fall over or turn yellow - signs that the bulbs are reaching maturity - then stop watering.

Start harvesting scallions, or green onions, when the tops are about 6 inches tall; the larger the plants grow, the stronger their flavor becomes. Begin pulling onion bulbs as soon as they're large enough to use.

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