

Renee's Garden

HOW TO GROW GREAT ONIONS

WHEN YOUR ONION PLANTS ARRIVE

- *Remove onion plants from the shipping box immediately. While they may appear dry, they're simply dormant..
- *DO NOT put the plants in soil or water before planting. Keep in a well-ventilated, cool area until you can plant them.
- *Plant your onions within a week of arrival if possible - they can be kept for up to several weeks if absolutely necessary.

Preparation and Fertilizing

Onions require full sun, good soil drainage and soil rich in nitrogen. Choose a location that gets plenty of direct sun and where your onion plants will not be shaded by other crops. Onions grow best on raised beds or raised rows at least 4" high and 20" wide. Pull and remove all visible weeds. The soil should be loose and crumbly. If it's compacted, work in compost to improve aeration and drainage. Onions are heavy feeders and require consistent feeding to produce big solid bulbs. At planting time, prepare the soil first with compost and also work in a good source of granular, high nitrogen fertilizer. There are many good granular, organic-based fertilizers available such as blood meal, bat guano, composted chicken manure, and cotton seed meal. As plants grow and begin to bulb up, plan to supplement feed every few weeks with a high nitrogen liquid fertilizer such as fish emulsion. Be sure to apply all fertilizers according to suggested rates.

Planting & Bulbing

Plant your onions 4 to 6 weeks before the last estimated spring freeze. Make rows 12 to 18 inches apart. If you want the onions to grow to mature bulbs, plant them 4-6" apart and 1" deep (and no deeper, as this will inhibit their ability to bulb). If you prefer to harvest some earlier as green onions, space them 2" apart and pull every other onion during the growing season, leaving the rest to grow to maturity.

When the ground starts to crack as the onions push the soil away, the bulbing process has begun. **Stop** fertilizing at this point. Do not hill soil up around the bulbing onions; it's normal and beneficial for much of the onion bulb to be above the ground as they mature.

Watering

Water thoroughly after planting, and regularly thereafter – onions require about 1 inch of water per week, and the closer to harvest, the greater the need for regular watering. Onions have shallow roots, so don't let the soil at the base of the plants become dry and cracked. If an onion plant fails to receive enough water it will not make a large bulb. Overwatering is equally problematic - if leaves develop a yellow tinge, cut back on watering. Drip irrigation is a good way to stay on top of onions water needs and helps discourage foliar diseases. When bulbs are mature, the onion tops will begin to fall over. At this point, stop watering and let the soil dry out before harvesting.

Weeding

Weed control is especially important early in the growing season to prevent competition for nutrients. An application of corn gluten meal raked into the top inch of soil every six weeks during the growing season will prevent weeds from returning, or you can mulch the plants with a light layer of organic material like straw or wood chips to help control weeds and preserve moisture. When the onions start to bulb up, push the mulch back to they get good air circulation.

Pest and disease control

The most common problems you may encounter growing onions are blight, purple blotch and thrips. Both blight and purple blotch are caused by fungus, and are more common during periods of high moisture. Blight appears as small white spots surrounded by a greenish halo. Purple blotch causes a purplish discoloration of leaves. Proper plant spacing helps increase air flow and reduces both blight and purple blotch. Thrips are sucking insects that sometimes attack onion plants, causing the leaves to turn grey or silvery. Thrips are barely visible as tiny yellow or dark specks about 1 mm long. Organic controls for thrips include safer soap or Pyrethrin. Thrips can overwinter in weeds, so be sure to weed your garden patch after harvest and control weeds in the onion bed throughout the growing season.

Harvesting

Proper treatment at harvest maximizes the amount of time you'll be able to store your onions. When the tops of the onions turn brown or yellow and fall over, it's time to harvest. Ideally, the plant will have about 13 leaves at this point. Pull the onions early in the morning on a sunny day and shake off excess soil. Dry the onions in the sun for two days. To prevent sunscald, lay the tops of one row over the bulbs of another.

Curing

How long your onions will keep depends on how you treat them after harvest. They must be dried thoroughly to avoid problems with rot. If left outside when the weather is dry, this will take two or three days. The entire neck (where the leaves meet the bulb) should be dry all the way to the surface of the onion and shouldn't "slide" when you pinch it. The skin will take on a uniform texture and color. If rain is expected, you'll need to dry your onions indoors. Spread them out in a well-ventilated area with room to breathe. Drying indoors may take longer than outdoors. Once the onions are thoroughly dry, clip the roots and cut back the tops to one inch or you can braid the uncut tops together and hang the handsome braid in an airy spot. Now they are ready to eat.

Storing

Store onions in a cool, dry, well-ventilated location, such as a garage or cellar – they do best in very cool conditions at about 65 to 70% humidity. Put them into mesh bags or pantyhose legs with a knot between each onion to permit airflow. Check your stored onions every few weeks to eliminate any soft onions, and remove them to avoid deterioration of the others. As a general rule, sweeter onions which have a higher water content don't store as long as more pungent ones, so be sure to use the sweeter more mild onions first.