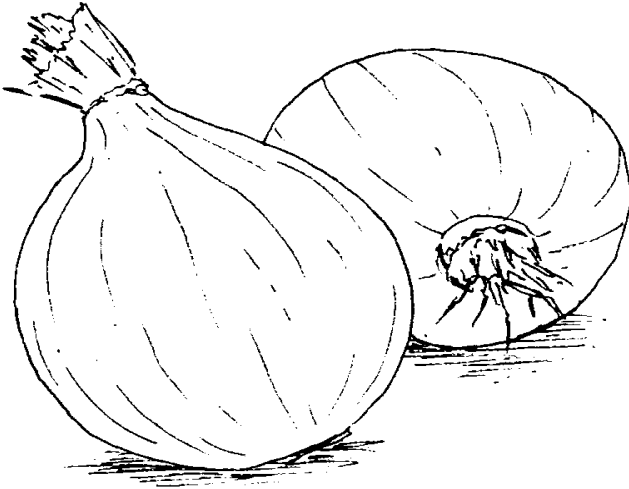




*Time and Hints to Take Home*

# Onions



**Seeds or sets:** Onions can be grown from seed or more typically from 'sets' that are sold in the spring. As you look for varieties be sure to note whether they are 'short' or 'long' day onions. 'Long' day types do better here in the north. 'Long' and 'short' days refer to the number of hours of daylight the onion needs to start forming its bulb. 'Long' day types are well suited for the north because they grow leaves and get well established before the days get long enough to set bulbs. You should also check the storage life for any types you chose. Some onions are labeled as keepers while some definitely do not keep well and are best if used immediately. Most gardeners plant both types to have fresh onions plus keepers for later in the year.

To grow onions from seed you must start the seeds indoors at least 12 weeks before the date when you want to plant them. Because they can go out before all danger of frost is past, you can plant them as early as May 1<sup>st</sup> most years. In our area, that means starting the seeds in late January. The advantage to growing onions from seed is there is a greater selection of types of onions to choose from. Plant the seeds in a flat filled with sterile starting medium. You can usually let the seedlings grow to transplant size in the flat and tease them apart when you are planting them outside. Plant them slightly deeper than they were in the flat.

Onion 'sets' are small onions and are typically sold by the pound. The onions are about the size of a nickel. They are usually not sold as specific varieties but rather as yellow, white or red. Be sure to select firm onions with no signs of soft rot.

Plant Land also sells 'Walla-Walla' sweet onions as starts. These look just like scallions with the tops trimmed to about 6". These starts are necessary because this very popular onion can only be grown from seed. The starts are sold to give gardeners a head start without the fuss of seed starting. They are planted just like onions started from seed.

**Preparing the site:** Onions need a site with full sun. It is very important that the soil is loose and has good texture. The onion will be unable to form much of a bulb if it has to fight hard soil. Raised beds work extremely well for onions. Rich soil is also necessary. Onion growth and yield can be greatly enhanced by spreading fertilizer rich in phosphorous (10-20-10) 2-3" below your transplants at planting time. Make a trench in the top of the bed 4" deep, distribute 1 cup of fertilizer per 10 linear feet of row, cover the fertilizer with 2" of soil and plant the onions.

Weed control is also very important. One way to get an early jump on weeds is to pre-irrigate the beds three weeks prior to planting and when the weeds emerge either treat the beds with Roundup® or till the soil to kill the weeds. Be sure to keep up with weeds all season long too.

**Planting the onions:** When you are using sets, plant each little onion set about 2" deep, allow 4-5" between plants and 1-2' between rows. You may want to harvest some of the onions during the growing season as green onions. Plant the sets as close as 2" apart. Pull every other onion during the growing season, leaving some to mature into larger onions and enjoy the thinnings as scallions. Water thoroughly after planting.

Your onion seedlings will look like grass when they are ready to transplant. Be sure to harden them off before setting them out. Hardening off prepares tender plants that have only been indoors for being outdoors. Set them outside for a few hours, increasing each day for a week. Start with just a couple of hours and leave them out all day by the end of the week. You can trim them to about 6" when you plant them. Plant them about 1-1 ½" deep in the garden. Allow 4-5" between plants and 1-2' between rows. You can also plant these closer together and harvest scallions to thin the rows. Water thoroughly after planting.

**Fertilizing:** About three weeks after planting, onions typically need a boost of nitrogen. If your soil is alkaline (above 6.5pH), use sulfur based nitrogen, such as ammonium sulfate (21-0-0) at the rate of 1 cup per 20' of row. Spread it down the center on top of the soil. If your soil is acidic (below 6.5pH), a calcium-based fertilizer like calcium nitrate will provide nitrogen while raising the pH. Plant Land sells simple pH test kits that you can use to test your soil. Fertilize every 2 to 3 weeks. Stop fertilizing within 3 weeks of harvest when the necks begin to feel soft.

**Watering:** Water the transplants immediately after planting. Because of their shallow root system, onions require frequent irrigation. Avoid overhead irrigation because it can cause foliage diseases. If the foliage has an unhealthy, yellowish tint, the plants are being over irrigated. The soil will be overly dry around an under watered crop and may become cracked. Onions generally require 20" of irrigation during a growing season and the closer to harvest, the greater the need for water. If the onion does not get enough water, it will not make a large bulb. When the necks start falling over the onions are maturing. Watering should then be discontinued and the soil allowed to dry out. This typically occurs sometime in mid to late August.

**Weeding:** Mulch is very useful to keep down weeds. Some gardeners use newspaper to mulch onions and then till it under at the end of the season. Grass

clippings (chemical free) or small wood chips also work. Onions are relatively shallow rooted so do not cultivate too deeply. Keep soil loose so onions can expand easily but do not push dirt or mulch on top of the onions since this can prevent the onion from forming its natural bulb.

**Harvesting:** Onion tops turn completely yellow and fall over when the growing process is complete. Bending the tops over early will expedite the process but will decrease bulb size. Pull the onions out of the ground and let them dry in the sun for two days. Do not let irrigation run on them and put them in a dry place if rain is forecasted. Lay the tops of one row of bulbs over the bulbs of another to prevent sunscald. When the onions are dry, clip roots and cut back tops to one inch or braid uncut tops together and hang the onions in an airy spot. The best way to store onions is in a mesh bag or nylon stockings. Place an onion in the bag and tie a knot or put a plastic tie between the onions and continue the process until the netting is full. Loop the netting over a rafter or nail in a cool, dry location and when an onion is needed, simply clip off the bottom onion with a pair of scissors or remove the plastic tie. You can also spread the onions out on a screen, which will allow adequate ventilation but remember to keep them from touching each other. As a general rule, the sweeter the onion, the higher the water content and therefore the shorter the shelf life. A more pungent onion will store longer so eat the sweet varieties first and save the more pungent onions for storage. Every few weeks, the onions should be sorted to throw out the bad onions since they will accelerate the decaying process with all the onions.

The Plant Land staff can answer any further questions you may have.