



## *Growing Onions*

Want an easy garden crop that not only provides fresh tasting goodies and also gives you something to remember your garden success with in winter? Grow onions!

You can start onions from seed but here in Montana's short growing season you will do better starting with onion 'sets'. These are tiny little onions that you buy and plant like seeds. Each one matures to make one full size onion. One pound can contain 50-75 onions so starting with one pound means that after thinning you should harvest 20 or so pounds of onions for winter storage.

Sets are typically available for white, yellow or red onions. White onions are good for harvesting the green tops early for scallions. Plant them thickly! Left in the ground, they mature to mild white onions that are great for cooking. They do not keep as well as yellow onions. Yellow onions are good for cooking and when stored correctly, keep well into winter months. Red onions are delicious for fresh eating in salads or sandwiches. They are not good keepers but will last in proper storage for a month or more. When you buy your onion sets you might want to consider mixing some of all three colors for various uses so you can enjoy onions in all their culinary glory.

Sweet Walla Walla onions are sold as green starts in deep six packs at Plant Land. Again, each start makes one onion so after thinning you may have about 20 pounds of onions at harvest. Walla Walla's are not great keepers but are one of the tastiest sweet onions you can grow for fresh use. Gently tease the plants apart before planting.

Choose a spot with good sun that is weed free. A weed infestation can ruin your onion crop. If you are rotating crops in your garden, avoid a spot where brassicas such as broccoli, cauliflower or cabbage have been grown in the last two years. The soil should be very loose and have good texture. Good, loose soil allows onions to grow to full size while fighting through poor, hard soil will give you puny onions. Amending your soil with one bag of compost and one bag of soil pep will make good garden soil for happy onions.

Plant each tiny onion set in a furrow about three inches deep. Cover them loosely with about ½ inch of soil and water them in. As the onions sprout cover them with more dirt until the furrow is filled. Be sure to use good soil. As the green tops come up, thin the patch down to one onion every 2-3 inches. Use the tops as delicious scallions. Keep the soil evenly moist through the growing season and weed free. You can top dress with soil pep as mulch to help hold in moisture and hold down weeds once you stop adding soil.

If you see any flower heads developing cut them off to the base. As the season progresses you will see the tops start to yellow. This means the onions are maturing to harvest. At this point, stop watering the plants and allow the tops to yellow completely and fall over. Once this has occurred, you can pull up the onions and dry them for keeping. Do not cut off the tops. In fact, you can try braiding them for a fancier onion presentation. Braid some tough twine in to reinforce the tops. Spread the onions over a screen in a dry spot out of the weather. Most garages are just about perfect.

Before the temperatures drops to freezing, cut off unbraided tops and store your onions in a cool, dry place in the house or basement. Mesh onion bags are obviously perfect for this. Be sure the humidity and moisture levels are low. If you are planning on storing them for months, check in on them periodically and remove any that are showing any signs of rot or mold.

A nice onion patch does not take much space in the garden and the fresh flavor is very rewarding. Using an onion you grew in summer for a soup you make in winter is one of the real satisfactions of gardening. Try growing onions this year!