

ONIONS



In New England, we grow *long-day onions*, which need more than 16 hours of light daily (sunrise to sunset) during the peak of their growing cycle to form bulbs. They are triggered to mature when the days begin to get shorter in late June, so we want them to be well on their way by then.

ENJOYING THE BOUNTY

Onions are one of the best and moist useful crops in the veggie garden. They can be enjoyed raw or cooked in many savory dishes and can even be made into a jam. Try the classic French onion soup if you have an abundance of them.

Onions store well, and you can also freeze them. Chopping them into amounts you'd use in a recipe and then freezing is a good approach.

People have used onions medicinally for centuries, especially as an antimicrobial that can help reduce coughs and colds. Onions are high in antioxidants, high in Vitamin C, and packed with fiber. Research shows they can help regulate your immune system, stimulate the production of collagen, improve the absorption of iron, and provide some protection against several chronic diseases including cancer and heart disease.

Fun tip: did you know you can use onion skins to dye fabric?



CHOOSING A SITE

Onions grow best in a well-drained soil that's rich in organic matter. Choose a full-sun spot.

PLANTING

Plant as early as possible in the spring, in late April on the Cape if the soil will allow. Onions can handle a light frost, and if a hard frost is forecasted, you can protect the plants with blankets or row covers to prevent damage.

Stay away from buying sets to start, as they are more likely to bolt and don't store as well. Start your own seeds in February or buy plants already started.

Plant 4 inches apart. Once they are established, mulch well with hay. Until then, keep well weeded; they don't like competition.

TAKING CARE: WATERING, FEEDING, PRUNING

In the spring, side-dress with compost and feed every two weeks with fish emulsion.

Make sure the plants get 1 to 2 inches of water each week until July 4; this is important for forming large bulbs. Once the bulbs begin to form in early July, stop fertilizing and reduce watering.

In the fall, prepare the soil where you plan to plant your onions next year by adding bonemeal—add 1 pound for a row that's 20 × 3 feet). Also add 1 pound of wood ash. Then pile chopped leaves 9 to 12 inches thick.

AVOIDING PESTS AND DISEASE

When growing onions, cultural practices are important for plant health, pest management, and pest reduction. Be thoughtful when considering site selection, soil preparation, planting, and watering. Use a 3- to 4-year crop rotation and be

sure to remove all vegetation after harvest. Manage your weeds before they go to seed. Use disease-free transplants and moderate fertility.

HARVESTING

Onions are ready to harvest a couple of weeks after you notice their tops falling over—usually about late July or early August. Dig up the onions and spread them in the sun for a day or two to dry. Then bring them in and cut off the tops, leaving a 1-inch neck, and let them dry, or “cure,” farther away from the sunlight. Store them in mesh bags, ideally at 40°F.

CONSIDERING SPECIFIC VARIETIES

Several varieties do well on the Cape. Here are a few options:

AILSA CRAIG

Named for a Scottish island, this yellow heirloom variety from the late 19th century produces a very large, mild bulb.

PATTERSON

Another variety that produces great-tasting yellow bulbs that store particularly well.

REDWING

This red onion is known for its reliable harvest and long storage.

