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Onions in the Garden

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HORTICULTURE FACT SHEET 06

1999 HG/H 06

Onions are one of the most widely grown vegetables. They can be a major flavor additive, used raw, or cooked in a variety of recipes. Chopped onions contain only 65 calories per cup, but contribute relatively small amounts of essential nutrients to our diet.

Onions will grow in many types of soil but prefer it to be light and well drained. Enriching it with manure or other organic matter will loosen the soil and large onions will be easier to produce.

GREEN ONIONS

Green or bunching onions are usually a by-product of bulb production. Harvesting to thin the onion row will usually furnish an abundance. Planting onion sets in the spring is a good way to have green onions earlier than from seed.

Evergreen White Bunching or Welsh Onion (He Shi Ko) produce green onions only and do not bulb. They are very winter hardy and form a clump from which green onions may be harvested for a prolonged period.

FALL BULB ONIONS

Onions may be grown directly from seed, dry sets or green plants. Onion seed will germinate in cool soils and may be planted as early as March 1st if the soil can be properly prepared. Thin the stand and use for green onions to leave 3 to 4 inches between plants. Multiple rows or a broadcast pattern may be used as long as you have the 3 to 4 inches between final bulbs.

You can grow your own green onion plants indoors. Use a sterilized planting mix with extra vermiculite over the seeds. About February 15 sow the seeds thickly and keep at 70°–72°F. As soon as seedlings emerge, place in a sunny window or under a fluorescent light. Transplant them in the garden April 1st to May lst with a 3 to 4 inch spacing between plants. Garden stores also sell green onion transplants.

Dry sets may be placed in the garden very early—March 15 to April 1st. Because this early planting gives them a cold treatment, some may make a seed stalk (bolt) which causes a poor bulb. Use those for green onions. Smaller sets (less than the diameter of a dime) are less apt to bolt, so segregate the sets by size. Use the smaller ones for bulb production and the larger ones for green onions.

VARIETIES

Onions are very sensitive to day length and are divided into long and short day varieties. Many long day varieties will perform well in Utah.

Early: Ebenezer sets, Utah Sweet Spanish transplants.

Seed: Crystal White Wax (pickling), Walla Walla, Snow White, Utah Yellow Sweet Spanish, Fiesta, Spartan Sleeper, Sweet Sandwich. Fiesta and Spartan Sleeper are longer keeping varieties than the Sweet Spanish types. Sweet Sandwich is a long keeper which looses pungency in storage.

FERTILIZER

Plant onions in soil that has had 2 lbs. of 16-16-8 or similar fertilizer per 100 sq. ft. added. They respond to extra nitrogen so add ½ cup per 10 ft. of row 4 to 5 weeks after planting. Repeat at least one more time during the summer. Add the fertilizer just before an irrigation.

IRRIGATION

Keep an adequate moisture level during the summer because onion roots are not deep. Onions do not tolerate competition from other plants so keep the area weed free. A mulch of straw or lawn clippings will help control weeds and conserve moisture.

Onion bulbs need not be kept covered as they grow. Onion roots are very shallow and digging the soil to cover the bulbs may result in root damage and smaller bulbs.

OVERWINTERING ONIONS—BULBS IN JUNE

Sow the seed in a well prepared, fertilized soil August 1–5. The planting time is very critical. In late February weed the area carefully and apply ½ cup of ammonium sulfate or ⅓ cup of ammonium nitrate per 10 ft. of row. Use the fertilizer again April 1–15.

Variety selection is very important. Walla Walla Sweet and Sweet winter will tolerate Utah winters and produce bulbs. Most summer varieties will form as stalk without bulbing.

HARVESTING AND STORAGE

Breaking the green onion tops will not hasten maturity. Instead, the rate of food manufactured by the tops is slowed. The bulb is stored food that comes from the leaves. Final bulb size is smaller than when tops mature normally. This practice encourages neck rot and storage problems. Reducing water or cutting the roots with a shovel late in the season are ways to hasten bulb maturity.

Harvest when the tops die and the neck no longer is thick. If some are late maturing and have a thick neck, use them first. Spread the onions in a warm shady place until the outer skins are papery and the roots thoroughly dry.

Onions store best under dry, well ventilated conditions. They should be cool, even close to 32° F. The tops may be braided with a cord for reinforcement if you want to hang them. Otherwise, place them in mesh bags or slatted boxes. Do not store onions in paper sacks or solid side boxes because they restrict needed air circulation.

PESTS

- **Maggots:** Diazinon as a furrow treatment at planting time.
- **Thrips:** Diazinon, malathion or pyrethrins-rotenone combination.
- **Pink Root:** Plant in non-infested soil. Treat with vapam before planting. Use pink root resistant varieties.

DISCLAIMER

Varieties, trade names, and seed company names have been given for clarification and information only. Utah State University Extension Service does not endorse them, nor does it intend criticism of similar varieties, products or companies not listed.

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