



## Growing the Onion Family

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Garlic, onions, leeks, shallots, chives and perennial onions all belong to the Allium family (along with a number of ornamental plants). As a group, they grow well in fertile, well drained soil in full sun.

### ONIONS

Onions, *Allium cepa*, can be grown from seeds, sets, or transplants. Most varieties will produce either green onions or bulb onions depending on when you plant and how soon you harvest. Onions are heavy feeders; work fertilizer and either compost or manure into the soil before planting. Use about a pound of compost or manure per square foot of ground; for fertilizer, follow the package instructions. Keep the plants well watered and weeded, especially when the bulbs are enlarging. An additional feeding in July will improve production. Try to rotate your onions—plant in a new area each year.

Sow onion seed ½ inch deep in rows 1-2 feet apart. If using plants or sets, plant 1½-2" deep. Keep plants or sets cool and dry and plant as soon as possible after the danger of heavy frost when the soil can be worked, usually around the beginning of March.

For **GREEN ONIONS**, plant 2-3" apart. Begin harvesting in about a month. Scallions or bunching onions (varieties bred not to form bulbs) do not hold well in the garden, so it's best to stagger your plantings at weekly intervals. You can also plant regular bulb onion varieties 3" apart, pull the alternate ones as green onions, and let the others mature to form bulbs.

For **BULB (STORAGE) ONIONS**, plant 4-5" apart. Many seed-grown varieties will not mature in our short growing season. For best results, use sets or transplants. Or choose overwintering varieties to plant seeds in August for harvest the next year. For storage onions, bend the tops over to the ground in September. After 2-3 days, pull them out and dry them on newspapers in a warm dry place until the bulbs are thoroughly dry and the tops are withered—usually about 10 days. Then brush off any remaining soil and store in a cool, dry, dark place that has good air circulation.

**WALLA WALLA ONIONS** are normally planted as seedlings or bareroot plants in early to mid spring. Plant as soon as soil is manageable and the danger of heavy frost is past. Plant transplants 1 ½ to 2" deep, 3-4" apart in rows 12" apart. If planting bareroot plants, soak overnight in water before planting. Keep damp for 1 to 2 weeks after planting, then water normally. Walla Wallas will be ready for harvest in about 120 days, when tops start falling over. They do not store well; use them immediately, chop and freeze them, or dehydrate them for later use.

### **GARLIC**

Garlic, *Allium sativum*, can be planted in late fall or in early spring. Each clove in a bulb is planted separately, pointed end up. For the biggest bulbs at harvest, plant only the largest cloves. Plant pointy end up, 6-8" apart and 2-4" deep. Larger cloves should be planted deeper and farther apart. Also, plant deeper in the fall than in the spring, and/or cover with mulch after planting. Fertilize an organic vegetable food in the spring, and keep weeded. Harvest when the leafy tops die back, usually in July. Air dry the bulbs and then remove the tops or braid them together. Store in a cool dry place. For more detailed information, see Sky's Garlic handout, updated each spring and fall with the bulb varieties we're getting.

**SOFTNECK GARLIC** is the most commonly found garlic; almost all supermarket garlic is a softneck variety. It is easier to grow and keeps longer than hardneck garlic. Softnecks are recognized by the white, papery skin and abundance of cloves.

**HARDNECK GARLIC** coils at the top of its stalk. It has fewer but larger cloves than softneck varieties. The hardneck varieties have less of an outer bulb wrapper, sometimes none at all. This makes them more sensitive and reduces their shelf life.

**ELEPHANT GARLIC**, *Allium ampeloprasum babbingtonii*, is probably more closely related to the leek than to ordinary garlic. The bulbs are very large, fist-sized, and can weigh over a pound. In terms of flavor, elephant garlic is much less intense and sweeter. It has been described as "garlic for people who don't like garlic".

### **LEEKs**

Leeks, *Allium ampeloprasum*, are planted in early to mid spring for a delicious fall or winter harvest. You can plant from seed or from transplants. Leeks, like other onion family plants, prefer a rich, loamy soil. Add plenty of compost, and fertilize with a good vegetable fertilizer. Plant the rows 18" apart. With leeks, the edible portion is the white part of the shaft, so you want to maximize that part. You do this by trenching or hilling. The easiest way is by transplanting the leeks into trenches about 6" deep—place individual leeks 4-5" apart. Carefully cover the leek transplants to the first leaf joint (no deeper, or you'll get dirt inside the leek shaft). As the leeks grow, keep pulling soil into the trenches, always up to the first leaf joint. By fall, your leeks will have 6" of snowy, edible stalk below the green leaves. Short season (fall) varieties tend to be smaller and less winter hardy. Long season (winter) varieties have fatter stalks and may be harvested through the winter.

### **SHALLOTS**

Shallots, *Allium ascalonicum*, are small mild-flavored onion-like or garlic-like clustered bulbs used for seasoning. Like garlic, they are planted in fall or very early spring. Shallots have a milder flavor than onions. Plant the bulbs in rich, loose, fertile soil 6" apart and just deep enough that the tips barely show. Keep weeded, watered, and fertilized for best harvest. Harvest when the leafy tops die back, usually in July. Separate the bulbs, air dry them, and then store in a cool dry place.

### CHIVES

Chives, *Allium schoenoprasum*, are the smallest species of the onion family. The leaves are used as garnish and flavoring in salads, dips and soups due to their mild onion flavor. The mauve colored flowers are also edible. Chives thrive in well drained, rich soil and full sun. Prepare the soil just like you would onions (see above.) This plant will tolerate most soil types and has a low nutrient requirement. Chives come in a variety of flavor, height and flower color. Chinese chives have a mild garlic flavor and white flowers.

### PERENNIAL ONIONS

Perennial onion starts are sometimes available at Sky Nursery. They may include Multiplier Onions/Potato Onions (*Allium cepa* var. *aggregatum*) or "topsetting" onions such as the Egyptian Walking Onion, *Allium cepa* var. *proliferum*.

**MULTIPLIER ONIONS** are hardy, productive perennials. Multiplier onions produce a cluster of smallish bulbs at ground level from a single planted bulb. You then eat the larger bulbs, and save the smaller ones for replanting. Grow them like shallots.

**EGYPTIAN WALKING ONIONS** also grow perennially in a bed. The hardy bulbs set bulblets on stalks. Air bound bulblets will sprout new smaller stalks, which fall over and replant themselves, hence the name "walking" onion. (Or you can harvest the top sets and plant them yourself if you want to control the onion's travels.) Once established, you can harvest both (small) bulb onions and green onions from your plants. They are especially valued for their green onion shoots in extremely early spring. Note: they won't produce the topsets the first year, nor should they be harvested. Be patient and let them get established. They need to put down roots before they feel ready to travel! Plant walking onions in rich, well-drained soil and full sun, and give them good compost and organic vegetable fertilizer in the spring.