

# ALLIUMS

**A**llium is the hardy genus of herbs and vegetables that gives us the onion, garlic, chive, leek and shallot. It also includes a few hardy ornamental species that bloom early in the season. Alliums are popular with home gardeners for many reasons, one important one being that the wide range of flavors go with almost everything! Additionally, some alliums like garlic, onions and shallots can be stored for months, and other alliums can be planted just once and will provide an ongoing yield. Make a little room in your home garden to grow some alliums.

## Onion (*Allium cepa*)

When growing bulbing onions, remember to start early. Cold weather won't hurt onions, and they need as much time as possible to grow big, lush green tops. The more green top growth they have, the bigger the bulb will be. Onions grow green leafy tops for a while until an increase in temperature and daylight tells them to start putting energy into bulb development. The longer the plants are growing outside in cool weather and producing green tops, the bigger and better your onions will be. You can plant onions outside several weeks before the last spring frost date without hurting them.



When buying seeds or sets, be sure to purchase varieties that will do well in your area. Many onions are classified as “short-day” and “long-day” varieties with short-day suited for the south and long-day suited for the north. Some good varieties for growing in the North East are: Stuttgarter, Big Red, Southport Red Globe, Carmen, Sweet Sandwich, Early Yellow Globe, Norstar, and Ebenezer.

You can start onion seeds indoors, purchase transplants or grow them from bulbs or sets. Many people prefer sets because they give you a good, quick start and require no thinning. Onion sets are hardy and can be planted once the soil can be worked in spring. When purchasing sets, choose bulbs that are firm, not sprouting and are about the diameter of a dime.

If you want large, bulbing sweet onions, sow seeds indoors 2-3 months before the average last frost date in your area. You can sow the seeds directly outdoors once the soil can be worked, but resulting bulbs are usually not as large. Harden off seedlings for about 2 weeks before you plant them outdoors. If hardened off properly, you can plant onions outdoors 2-3 weeks before the average last frost date.

Choose the most weed-free area in your garden for onions as they will perform poorly in weedy areas, and work the area right before you plant to get rid of any weeds just beginning to germinate. Also, work in some compost or dehydrated manure and a balanced fertilizer such as 10-10-10 or its equivalent before you plant.

Place onion sets 1-2" deep with the flat end down and space them 4-6" apart. If you want scallions, plant them closer with the intention of thinning the rows until the plants are 6" apart. Use the thinnings as scallions.

It's important to keep your onion beds well weeded, watered and fertilized regularly. A side dressing of dehydrated manure or a balanced fertilizer (10-10-10 or its equivalent) is recommended when the plants are 6-8" high and again 3-4 weeks later. One side dressing should include a little bone meal to give the growing bulb extra phosphorous.

Water the onion plants regularly as water stressed plants will produce bulbs that are pungently flavored. The critical time for water is when the bulb begins to swell. If a plant sends up a flower stalk, pull up the bulb and use it. Once the top begins to yellow, withhold water and ease the bulbs partially out of the ground. Bend the tops over away from the sun to allow the bulb to get all the sunlight possible.

When the onion tops are brown and dry and the skin is papery, the bulbs can be lifted. Brush off the soil, but don't wash them. Spread the bulbs out in a warm, airy place out of direct sunlight. You might even turn them occasionally to promote even

drying. Once they're dry, (about two weeks), store them in a cool dry place (like a root cellar). If possible, store the onions in mesh bags and hang them from the ceiling to promote good air circulation around them. The drier the onions, the better they'll store.

Onions are relatively pest and disease free, although they are susceptible to a few problems:

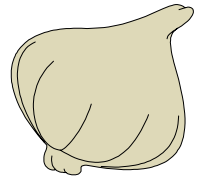
Onion maggot is a small white maggot that hatches from eggs laid by the onion fly near the base of the plant or on the bulb. It attacks both bulbing and scallion-type alliums late in the season and kills the plant by burrowing into the stem and bulb. Infected plants should be pulled out and burned to destroy remaining larvae. You can interplant onions with radishes as the maggots prefer radish root and will congregate in them. Then pull and destroy radishes.

Thrips are tiny insects which suck sap from the onion leaves and cause wilting thereby weakening the plant and reducing yields. They often appear as small white blotches on leaves. Thrips can be controlled by applying insecticidal soap or spraying plants with a hose knocking the thrips off the plants. Repeat this for 2-3 days and thrips will not return.

Neck rot is the most common disease of onions often occurring just after harvest or while bulbs are in storage. Starting in the neck, the tissues rot and become water-soaked and gray. Mild Bermuda-type onions are especially susceptible. Neck rot can be controlled by practicing good drying and storage techniques. Also, be sure to stop watering plants as soon as bulbs start to ripen.

## Garlic (*Allium sativum*)

A hardy perennial, usually treated as an annual, garlic has been hailed for its medicinal and health benefits, its insect repelling ability and its deterrent effect on evil spirits. One thing is for sure - garlic tastes great and is relatively easy to grow.



Garlic can be planted either in early Spring or in Fall. Fall planting is recommended for Northern gardeners and those with very hot summers. Fall planting means harvesting the following summer and usually produces larger bulbs than a spring planting. Northern gardeners should mulch garlic with straw over the winter and pick off any seed stalks that appear in Spring.

Garlic is most commonly grown from individual cloves broken off from the bulb. The outer cloves will usually produce the largest bulbs. Plant individual cloves with the flat end down, 3-4 inches apart and 1-2 inches deep in full sunlight and in well drained soil rich in organic matter. Be sure to keep the plants watered regularly. Harvest the bulbs when the leaves turn brown and die back - approximately 90-100 days. Let the bulbs dry out for several days and then store them in a cool, dry place. They'll keep for quite some time at 40-60 degrees F. Braiding the dried leaves is a good way to cure and store them.

## Shallots (*Allium ascalonicum*)

Shallots are uniquely flavored; somewhat like garlic but more delicate. They are often used in preparing gourmet dishes and are expensive to buy even though they are very easy to grow.

Shallots are grown very much like garlic. The cloves are planted in early Spring or in Fall and should be mulched overwinter in the North. Cloves should be planted with the broad end down 1-2 inches deep, 4 inches apart in well drained soil that has aged manure or compost worked in. Keep shallots well watered and fertilize as you would onions.

They're ready to harvest when the leaves start to wither. Dig them up when the weather is dry and let them cure outside for a few days out of direct sunlight. Store them in a cool, dry place.

## Leeks (*Allium porum*)

Leeks are a hardy, pest free and easy to grow crop even though their high market price would have you think otherwise. They can easily be started from seed, but must be started indoors in the north because their growing season is long - 90 to 130 days



Leeks need deep, fertile soil rich in compost or manure. Additionally, they are heavy feeders, so be sure your soil has lots of nitrogen.

You will need to hill soil around the leek stem several times during the season to create the white blanched, edible part. You can do this either by planting them in rows several feet apart and hilling soil up around the stem as it grows or you can plant them in 12 inch deep trenches and fill the trench as the plants grow making sure to cover the stems with soil.

Leeks can be harvested at any size and thinnings are delicious too! The ideal size for leeks is 3/4 to 1 1/2 inches in diameter. When harvesting leeks, use a gentle twisting motion. If you cut around each plant with a trowel to trim the roots, you'll make harvesting easier. Northern gardeners can mulch the leeks for the winter and harvest anytime.

## Chives (*Allium schoenoprasum*)

Chives can be grown indoors in a pot or in a permanent location outdoors. They're practically disease free and need virtually no attention once they begin producing. When harvesting, just clip off the tops and the plant will produce more.

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