

NATURAL GARDENER

Onions

Although the exact location and time of the onion's origin is unknown, the venerable onion has been cultivated for at least 5000 years. The Egyptians considered the onion an object of worship and buried them with their Pharaohs. In the Bible, Israelites ate onions. In India, Greece, and Rome, the onion was revered as medicinal. Pilgrims carried onions with them on the Mayflower, and planted them as soon as they could clear the land – in 1648. It's no surprise we still consider onions a culinary staple and continue to grow them today.

In Central Texas, onions can be planted by seed in October through mid-November, or by planting onion "sets" in January to February. Timing is critical, because onion plants are sensitive to both day length and temperature. If *sets* are planted in the fall, or if *seeds* are planted too early, they will likely bolt the next spring. Bolting means the onion will form a flower, which reduces size and density of the bulb, and makes it more prone to decay. Planting *seeds* too late may lead to immature plants being damaged by winter freezes.

Along with timing, the key to big beautiful onions is rich soil. Every ring of the onion is a leaf of the plant, so regular feeding with organic fertilizer is important.

To plant, choose a location in full sun. To prepare existing soil for onions, mix in one of our good quality composts, such as **Lady Bug brand Revitalizer**. The resulting blend should be about 50:50 compost and soil. At the same time, mix in **Lady Bug Flower Power** or Rabbit Hill Farm Buds & Blooms fertilizer, and **Lady Bug Glittering Greensand**. **Actino-Iron** may be used instead of greensand as an iron supplement and disease preventative. Adding coffee grounds to the soil will help to slightly lower the pH. If you have shallow soil or poor drainage, make a raised bed for your onions. Use **Lady Bug Hill Country Garden Mix** or **Rose Soil**, and add all of the amendments listed above except for the compost.

You can scatter **onion seeds** densely, but be sure to thin out the little green onions to 4" apart by February to get bigger bulbs. Plant **onion sets** one inch deep and four inches apart, or plant two inches apart and harvest every other one as a green onion. To help jump start either the seeds or the sets, water thoroughly after planting with seaweed or **Lady Bug brand John's Recipe**. Seaweed or John's Recipe may be used once or twice a month to strengthen and feed plants. Fertilize every 4 – 6 weeks after planting with **Lady Bug 8-2-4** or **Garden Pep Cottonseed Meal** to produce more leaves and bigger bulbs. Water regularly and deeply to keep soil moist, but not soggy. Add about three inches of mulch to help keep soil moist and to control weeds.

As the plant matures, you will notice a slowing in the growth and a softening in the neck just above the bulb. At this time, allow the soil to begin to dry. When the onions are fully mature, the green tops will fold over. Onions should be harvested and kept in a shaded, well-aerated spot a couple of days to cure. Then, cut off the roots and the tops, but leave one inch of the stem to prevent decay. Enjoy!

Onion Varieties for Central Texas (Days to Harvest from sets) Size potential; Open pollinated or hybrid variety; Description; Storage potential; Other information.

1015Y Texas Supersweet (115) – Up to 6"; Open pollinated; Yellow globe-shaped onions that are very sweet and mild; May store for 2 – 3 months; It gets its name because the seeds should be planted on October 15.

Southern Belle Red (110) – 4"; Hybrid; Sweet globe-shaped red onion with red rings that continue throughout the onion; May store 2 months; Bolt resistant.

Texas Early White (110) – 5" – 6"; Open Pollinated; White, globe-shaped, sweet bulb; May store for 2 – 3 months; Variety newly available to home gardeners in 2012; Disease and bolt resistant.

White Bermuda (95) – 3" – 4"; Open pollinated; Pure white, sweet, mild, and flat bulb; May store for 2 months; Also known as Crystal Wax; An heirloom variety.

Yellow Granex (100) – Up to 5"; Hybrid; Sweet, semi-flat bulb with rounded shoulders; May store for 1 month; The Yellow Granex is the famous Vidalia onion when it is grown in southern Georgia.