

Growing Onions

IF YOU PURCHASED ONION PLANTS... Do not put in soil or water before planting. Keep cool and dry until you can plant. Plants may appear dry, don't be alarmed; they're simply dormant. Don't worry if you can't plant them immediately, even if the roots and tips begin to dry out. The onions can live off the bulb for approximately three weeks. The most common problems growing onion plants are blight, purple blotch and thrips. Both blight and purple blotch are caused by fungus, and are more common when we've had an abundance of spring rain. Blight appears as small white spots surrounded by a greenish halo. Purple blotch causes a purplish discoloration of leaves. Proper plant spacing helps increase air flow and reduces fungus problems. The best preventative measure to use a fungicide every two weeks after planting (see right).



Fung-onil (left) is a conventional fungicide and Copper Fungicide is

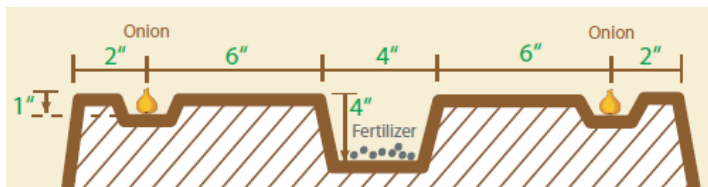
Thrips are insects that sometimes attack onion plants, causing the leaves to turn grey. Thrips are barely visible as tiny yellow or dark specks. Treat thrip infestations with an application of insecticide.

Onions require full sun and good soil drainage. Plant 4 to 6 weeks before May 15. For the best growth and yield, onions need fertilizer right from the start. Use a fertilizer with the middle number higher than the other two, such as Espoma Bulb Tone, 3-5-3.

Simple row method

If you want the onions to grow to maturity, space them 4" apart in a row. If you prefer to harvest some earlier as green onions, space them 2" apart and pull every other onion during the growing season, leaving the rest to grow to maturity.

If you have space, try this intensive system recommended by the onion plant grower.



At the center of a double row, dig a trench 4" deep & 4" wide. Sprinkle ½ cup fertilizer per 10 linear feet of row. Cover the fertilizer with 2" of soil.

Plant the onions 1" deep, 6" from the fertilizer trench on both sides of it. DO NOT plant the onions in the trench! Leave a 2" between the onions and the outside edge of the bed where you would hoe between the beds.

When planting several beds of onions, leave 16" between the outside edge of one bed, and the outside edge of the next. The spacing from the center of one fertilizer trench to the center of the next should be 36".

Water Water thoroughly after planting, and regularly thereafter. Onions have shallow roots, so don't let the soil at the base of the plants become dry and cracked. Overwatering is equally problematic. If leaves develop a yellow tinge, cut back on watering. The closer to harvest time, the greater the need for water. However, when the onion tops start falling over, stop watering and let the soil dry.

Fertilizer Every 2 to 3 weeks after planting, use a fertilizer with the middle number higher than the other two, such as Espoma Bulb Tone, 3-5-3. Sprinkle it on top of the original fertilizer strip if you're using the planting example above, or along side of the onion plants if you have them in a row, at the rate of ½ cup per 10 feet of row. Water the onions after every application. Stop fertilizing when the onions start to bulb (6-8 weeks after planting). When the onions push the soil away at the base of the plants, the bulbing process has begun



Weeds Controlling weeds is critical to prevent competition for nutrients. An application of corn gluten meal raked into the top inch of soil every six weeks during the growing season will prevent weeds from returning. Mulching with a light layer of straw will help control weeds and preserve moisture. Push the straw back when the plants start to bulb so they'll cure properly.

Harvest & Store Proper treatment at harvest maximizes the amount of time you'll be able to store your onions. They must be thoroughly dry to avoid rot. When the tops of the onions turn brown or yellow and fall over, it's time to harvest (approximately 10-12 weeks after planting). Pull the onions early in the morning on a sunny day. Dry in the sun for two days. To prevent sunscald, lay the tops of one row over the bulbs of another.

The entire neck (where the leaves meet the bulb) should be dry, all the way to the surface of the onion, and shouldn't "slide" when you pinch it. The skin will take on a uniform texture and color. If rain is expected, you'll need to dry your onions indoors. Spread them out in a well-ventilated area with room to breathe. Drying indoors may take longer than outdoors.

Once the onions are thoroughly dry, clip the roots and cut back the tops to one inch. Now they are ready to eat. Store in a cool, dry, well-ventilated location, such as a garage or cellar. Place them in mesh bags or netting to permit airflow. As a general rule, sweeter onions don't store as long as more pungent ones.



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