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Grow an "Allium Alley" this Winter!

by Michelle Le Strange, UC Master Gardener Program

By this time of year, most cool season vegetables are already planted and growing. However, garlic, onions, leeks, and shallots are a group of vegetables called alliums. They can still be planted NOW! Plant them in straight lines or use a garden hose to outline a gentle curve and plant along each side. Keep them grouped for easier maintenance. Grow them all in compost rich soil and keep the soil moist, but not too wet.

GARLIC "mother bulbs" can be purchased at local nurseries (don't use garlic from grocery stores). On the day of planting, break apart the mother bulb into separate "bulblets," keeping the papery cover on. Dig a hole 2 inches deep. Plant the bulblet pointed end up and leave 4 inches between bulblets. Harvest about 120 days after planting. When the tops bend, turn brown, and dry out, gently dig out garlic bulbs. Dry outdoors for 3 weeks.

ONIONS and **SCALLIONS** grow from seed, sets, or transplants. Seed needs a longer growing period and plants have to be thinned, if growing bulb onions. Sets are small, immature onion bulbs that are planted the same way as seed. Sets are a good method for producing a quick crop of green onions (scallions), but are not recommended for growing big bulb onions. Transplants are an easy method for producing an early crop of scallions or bulb onions. Plant bulb onions 4-6 inches apart and plant green onions one-half inch apart. Harvest green onions when they are pencil size in diameter.

Sweet onions, once called sweet Spanish or Bermuda onions, have high moisture content, moderate sugar, and low pungency. Regionally famous sweet onion varieties like Walla Walla, Vidalia, Maui and Grano/Granex are the same onion bred for different latitudes. Intermediate day varieties work best here and include Fresno Red, Stockton Red and Yellow, and Pantry Trio – a mix of white, bronze, and red onions.

When looking for scallion seed, use Japanese bunching onions. These are excellent mild scallions. Many presume scallions are immature onions. While young onions look like scallions, they may not match the taste. A good scallion should be mild enough to be enjoyed raw, without the tear jerking pungency of the onion. Still, many sweet onion varieties do satisfy the taste requirement and are easier to find. Intermediate or long day sweet onion types work best like White Lisbon and Sweet Spanish Valencia

LEEKS grow well in cold weather. To produce a succulent white stem, leeks must be blanched (covered or hidden from the sun). To do this, plant leek transplants into deep holes. Make a narrow trench 6 to 8 inches deep and tuck seedlings into the trench about 6 inches apart, adding soil back so it comes up to the base of the first green leaf. Water well. Leeks are creamier and sweeter tasting than onions.

SHALLOTS are small, onion-like bulbs with a unique flavor. They are more intense than onions, yet less pungent and less sweet. Used in soups and sauces they lend an additional layer of flavor that is more complex than onions, garlic or even leeks.

ALL ALLIUMS are easy to grow and fit right in to a vegetable or flower bed offering contrasting blue-gray, linear foliage to green broadleaf plants. Create your own Allium Alley down the middle or on an edge of a planting bed. When all is grown, you have the added bonus of harvesting a tasty vegetable. ENJOY!



The blue-gray linear foliage of alliums provides striking contrast with the green foliage of most broadleaf plants.

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