

Planting Onions

10.24.2017:

Q: I would like to plant some onions. Can you tell me which kind do best in Redding? Is it too late to plant onions?

A: To answer your second question first, it is not too late to plant onions if you plant them from sets. It is best to plant onions in September as you will get larger onions at harvest time but you should still get a harvest of medium sized onions if you plant now. Sets are tiny onion bulbs, grown from seed and forced into dormancy at an immature stage. You can buy these from any local nursery. These are the fastest way to get onions started.

The onion varieties that do best here in the northern California are the intermediate-day type. Onions are day length dependent plants, meaning that most onions start to grow bulbs as days lengthen. The lengthening days of late spring trigger the onion plant to start transitioning from growing leaves and roots to the business of forming bulbs. The types of onions that successfully grown in northern states, with their extra daylight hours, are different from the onions grown in the south. Most seed packets and catalog descriptions should reveal which varieties are intended for short-day regions (those that begin to form bulbs when day length is only 10 to 12 hours), intermediate-day regions (12 to 14 hours), or long-day regions (14 to 16 hours). There are a few onions are considered day-neutral, this type starts to set bulbs after a certain number of growing days. These varieties can be grown anywhere.

You may want to order your onion sets from a catalog or buy them at one of our local nurseries rather than a big box store as most garden centers label their bins of sets by color (white, yellow, or red) instead of by cultivar. If buying from a bin, resist picking out the largest sets from the bin as these can go to seed quickly instead of forming a large onion bulb. Sets that are one half inch in diameter—about the size of a dime—are the best buy.

To plant onions, place the sets in a shallow furrow and cover with just enough soil to leave their pointed tips at the soil surface. The spacing between onions should eventually be about six inches, depending on the mature size of the variety, but you can place the sets closer together initially and then thin later for use as green onions.

You may also see onions available in bundles of bareroot onion transplants or you can grow your own transplants by starting onions from seed in the greenhouse and setting the seedlings out in the garden in spring. To plant in the garden, dig a trench for the seedlings and place them slightly deeper than they were in the flat. As with sets, seedlings can be planted closer than their ultimate spacing of four to six inches, with the extras harvested as green onions.

Onions can also be grown from seed but they will not produce the biggest bulbs. Onions benefit from the head start they get from sets or transplants. It gets too hot here in the late spring for onions that are started from seed to fully grow into full size onion bulbs. But bunching onions or scallions are quicker to mature, and they can be seeded directly into the garden. Start with fresh seeds, or seeds that are no more than a year old, because onion seeds lose viability quickly in storage.