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SUMMARY

The best onion bulbs are obtained by starting your onions from seed. If you plant sets, expect to get scallions. In the Bay Area, the best seeds to use are short-day or intermediate varieties. Inquire before you buy.

Want Onion Bulbs? Start with Seeds.

By Terry Lippert, UC Master Gardener

For best results, plant onions in spring or fall.

Q. I have planted onion sets for a few years. The onions grow well, but they send up flower stalks and never produce large bulbs. How do I grow large onion bulbs?

A. Your experience with onion sets producing flower stalks and never forming bulbs is common.

Onions take two years to complete their biological life. When you plant onion sets, they're beginning their second growing season; they often put their energy into producing flower stalks, rather than forming bulbs. Onion sets are best used to produce green onions (scallions).

You are more likely to get onion bulbs if you plant seeds. Start them indoors, then transplant them into the garden when they are 3 to 4 inches tall. Alternatively, you can direct-seed them in the garden; plant seeds about a quarter-inch deep and maintain good soil moisture. If you plant directly in the garden, plant more seeds than necessary,

and thin them while the plants are small. Use thinned plants as scallions or transplant to other areas.

Thin onions to about 4 inches apart, or place transplants at that distance.

In the Bay Area, onions can be planted in spring or fall. In coastal areas, plant seeds directly in the garden in January or February for fall harvest, or in October for harvest in late spring. In interior areas, plant in February or March for fall harvest.

Seeds started indoors can be transplanted into the garden a month after those dates.

If the weather turns very cold when the onions are 6 to 10 weeks old, that can stimulate their production of flower stalks, even for plants that are growing from seed. If a freeze is forecast when the plants are in this vulnerable period, use row covers (lightweight plant protection fabrics sold in nurseries and online).



“An onion that has produced a flower stalk will never form a large bulb.”

Once a flower stalk has begun to grow, breaking off the stalk will not help the plant produce a bulb.

An onion that has produced a flower stalk will never form a large bulb.

Harvest and use onions as soon as you see flower stalks developing.

Another key to producing good bulbs is to pay attention to whether the seeds you plant are for “short-day,” “intermediate” or “longday” varieties. Short-day varieties form bulbs with 12 hours of continuous daylight. Long-day varieties require 14 to 16 hours.

Intermediate varieties are in the middle.

In the Bay Area, we have about 14.5 hours of light on the longest day of the year — not enough to trigger bulbing in many long-day varieties. For best results, plant short-day or intermediate varieties.

Day-length requirements are not always specified on seed packets. Many seed catalogs and online seed sources do specify, or you can ask at the nursery where you plan to buy your seeds.

Additional information about growing onions is available on these University of California websites:

<http://ipm.ucanr.edu>, and
<https://vric.ucdavis.edu/pdf/onion.pdf>.



Photo by UC Master Gardener Program of Contra Costa County.