

The Press Democrat
January 11, 2025

Onions are low-maintenance addition to a winter garden

By SONOMA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS
FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT



Red onions from Tierra Vegetable in Santa Rosa. Kent Porter/Press Democrat, 2016

It's hard to imagine a culinary world without onions, which are so essential to good flavor in cuisines worldwide. In fact, they're so important that dehydrated onions were included in World War II military kits to improve the flavor of otherwise bland rations.

Onions have been a popular dietary staple since prehistoric times, when they grew wild in regions all over the world. Wild onions, which still grow widely, have a very small bulb compared to the large bulbous cultivated onions we're familiar with today.

Many experts believe the cultivation of onions originated more than 5,000 years ago in Central Asia, although some research suggests it may come from the area of modern Iran and West Pakistan. Onions were one of the earliest cultivated crops because they were less perishable than other foods, easily transportable and adaptable to a variety of soils and climates. They were juicy enough to quench thirst but could also be dried and saved for future use. These qualities, in addition to their flavor, made them universally popular, and they've been an ancient food source as early as the Bronze Age.

Cultivated onions are believed to have spread both east and west via the Silk Road. They were grown in China as early as 5,000 years ago and they're referenced in some of the oldest Vedic writings from India. In Egypt, onions can be traced back to 3,500 BCE. The Bible describes how the Israelites, during their wanderings in the wilderness, longed for the onions, leeks and garlic they had in Egypt. The Sumerians were growing them as early as 2,500 BCE. During the fourth century BCE, Alexander the Great transported onions from Egypt to Greece, where they spread to other parts of Europe. The ancient Greek physician Hippocrates wrote that a wide variety of onions were eaten regularly in Greece.

In North America, the Pilgrims brought cultivated onions with them on the Mayflower, although there were already wild onions growing throughout North America. Native Americans used onions in a variety of ways (food, poultices, dyes). Around the same time, the Spanish introduced cultivated onions to the West Indies, where their use spread to other parts of the Americas. By 1775, onions were cultivated by Native Americans as well as the colonists.

Onions were more than a popular food source. In ancient Egypt, they were also an object of worship. The onion's concentric layers were seen as a symbol of eternal life. Egyptians often buried them with their pharaohs and paintings of onions were found on the inner walls of tombs and pyramids.

They have also long been used medicinally. Ancient Egyptians believed onions could make a person stronger and the workers who built the pyramids ate them every day. The ancient Greeks, and later the Romans, believed onions had health benefits that would increase athletic performance, either by eating them, drinking their juice or rubbing them on muscles. The Romans believed onions could aid vision, sleep, mouth sores, dog bites, toothache, dysentery and lumbago. In ancient India, onions were used for digestion as well as helping the heart, eyes and joints. In Europe during the Middle Ages, onions treated hair loss, headaches and snakebites.

The ancients weren't wrong to value onions medicinally, as today they're known to have antioxidant and anti-inflammatory benefits. There are studies indicating onions may lower the risk of some forms of cancer and protect against heart disease.



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Onions are an easy addition to the home garden. You can start them by seed or purchase seedlings from local nurseries and garden centers. Bulbing onions are a cool season vegetable whose seedlings are planted in early spring. They are dependent on the number of daylight hours. In Sonoma County, the intermediate-day types are preferable. Green onions, also known as scallions, are not dependent on daylight hours and can be planted from March through October. See the following link for instructions on planting and harvesting onions: <https://bit.ly/3PhoMea>

Contributors to this week's column were Wendy Stern, Diane Judd and Joy Lanzendorfer. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County sonomamg.ucanr.edu/ provides environmentally sustainable, science-based horticultural information to Sonoma County home gardeners. Send your gardening questions to scmgpd@gmail.com. You will receive answers to your questions either in this newspaper or from our Information Desk. You can contact the Information Desk directly at 707-565-2608 or mgsonoma@ucanr.edu.