

NEWS RELEASE

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Onions in the Garden

Each fall, home gardeners anxiously await the arrival of onion bunches at local nurseries and garden centers. I'm told requests for onion bunches can begin as early as September. As a rule, most nurseries in Stanislaus County will not have onion bunches until November. The availability of bunches depends upon weather and the schedule of the onion growers.

Onions belong to the genus *allium*, which also includes various crops used to season food. Onions were an important crop in ancient Egypt. The Bible even mentions that the Israelites who left Egypt to wander the desert complained bitterly about the lack of onion in their diet. Indeed, many a dish would be quite dull without the addition of this flavorful ingredient.

Onion Planting Requirements

Before planting onions in your home garden, it's essential to first understand their cultural requirements. Onions have shallow roots and need soil that is free of clods. They do poorly when weeds compete with them for water and nutrients.

Prepare your garden bed by mixing 1 ½" of compost into the soil. For gardeners with less than ideal soil, a 4" raised bed contained with wood slats or bender board is a good place to grow onions. Onions grown in compost enriched soil will not need additional fertilizer.

Onions can be grown using a variety of forms, including seed, set, transplant and bunches. Onion seed should be planted in rows ½" deep. Plant seeds ½" apart for green onions, and 5-6" apart for larger onions, or simply use the thinnings from onions planted closely together as green onions. Keep the ground moist until seedlings emerge. Tiny transplant onions have the same spacing requirements, and should be gently removed from their containers before planting.

Prior to planting onion sets, sort them into two piles: bulbs larger than a nickel and smaller than a nickel. The larger bulbs should be used to grow green onions, and the smaller ones left to develop into mature onions. Plant sets 1-2" apart and push them into the soil so the tip is barely showing. A publication on onions from the UC Davis Vegetable Research and Information Center states that sets are not a good method for the production of mature onions. Onions contained in sets are varieties not well adapted to California and frequently produce onions that bolt (go to seed) rather than forming a bulb.

Onion bunches contain about 50-100 transplants that are ready to be planted in your garden. Plant them 1 ½" deep and 4" apart. Grow them in rows 1 ½ to 2' apart.

Harvesting Onions

Stop irrigating onions when about 10% of the tops begin to fall over. Nutrients from the tops will continue to move into the bulb until the leaves turn brown. Onions can be left in the ground and used when needed. In fact, onions can be left in the ground and continuously harvested until all the tops are dry.

When harvesting, use a digging spade under the onions and gently push up through the soil until the onion roots are loose from the ground. Never pull the top of an onion to harvest it, as onions are easily bruised and should be treated with care. To dry the onions, brush the dirt off the bulbs and trim the roots. Leave them in a dry place, not touching, for about 2 weeks. Onions can be braided or the stems can be cut for storage.

Keep onions in a dark place with temperatures between 35-50°F. Red and white onions do not store for long periods of time, while yellow onions can be stored for months, because their skins are more resistant to diseases and insects.

For more information about growing onions, as well as garlic, leeks and shallots, see the publication “Alliums in Your Garden,” available from the University of California Cooperative Extension Office located off Crows landing Road at 3800 Cornucopia Way, Suite A. The guide will also be featured on the Stanislaus County Cooperative Extension Web page at: http://cestanislaus.ucdavis.edu/Gardening/Gardening_Articles.htm