

SPRIT OF GARDENING

Onions + Garlic

ONIONS

Onions may be planted in three ways: as seedlings, transplanted into the garden, seeded directly into the garden or planted from onion sets. Onions make a great addition to every garden because they take up little space, are easy to grow and produce a crop that can be stored for a long period of time.

BEFORE PLANTING

Direct seeding requires a fine seedbed and good moisture conditions. Seeding is the least expensive method of planting, but prone to the most problems. Onion sets need good soil, but not the fine texture required for the seeds. For transplanting, choose seedlings that are a healthy dark green.

WHEN TO PLANT

Plant onion bulbs in the spring as soon as the soil can be worked; early planting generally results in larger onions. The secret to growing large Spanish Onions is the timing; plant your seeds or sets in late fall. Expect to lose some over a hard winter.

Seed: Sow seeds to 1cm depth.

Transplants: Lay the plants in a trench and cover lightly with soil. The plants will straighten themselves out.

Sets: Press the sets into the soft soil so that only the tip shows above the ground. Plant scallions slightly deeper to get more white stem. To avoid trouble with root maggots, place the sets firmly on top of the soil, with only the root end underground.

Fall Planting: Experiment with a fall seeding in late October. Sow twice as much seed as you would in spring planting. You will have onions ready for eating in the spring.

HARVESTING

Green onions and scallions can be harvested whenever they appear ready; if they are picked earlier the flavor is milder. Bulb onions are usually ready in late August or early September. Allow onion tops to fall over naturally. Bending down tops can delay rather than speed maturity. Pull onions and dry in a shaded area for 2 to 4 weeks. When the plants have dried, cut off the tops one inch above the bulb.

STORAGE

Onions are ready to store when skins rattle and necks are thin and dry. Store in an area that is cool and dry. Keep onions in a container which allows good air circulation.

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GARLIC

Garlic is a wonderful crop, fairly easy to grow and relatively trouble free. A close relative of onions, leeks and shallots, garlic is no harder to cultivate. Thriving across the land in any moderately fertile, well-drained soil, garlic rewards the gardener with plump bulbs from midsummer well into winter.

PLANTING

Separate bulbs into cloves and plant only large, firm healthy ones. The sunnier the site, the larger the bulbs are likely to grow. Garlic needs well drained soil and a sprinkling of bone meal in the planting area will help strong roots develop. The best time to plant garlic is in late August for a harvest of large bulbs the following year. You can also plant in spring, the earlier the better.

Note: Each clove grows into a new bulb containing 10-20 cloves. The largest cloves produce the largest bulbs.

PLANTING METHODS

Push each clove into the ground to a depth of one and a half inches, firm the soil around it and water. The pointed end must be up or the bulb will not grow. Allow 2-3 inches between cloves.

In mid-June, curly green pigtails emerge from the centre of each plant. These are the scapes, hard stalks topped with tiny bulbils. All experts agree that it's best to nip garlic in the bud, as it were, snapping off the scapes after they have made a loop or two, to send more energy to the developing bulbs. The scapes' tender tops (as opposed to the hard fibrous bottom portion) are loaded with flavour.

HARVESTING

Stop watering shortly before harvest to improve storage quality. Allow the tops to fall over naturally. Garlic is ready to harvest when the leaves are withered and dry. Harvest as soon as they mature and leave the plants on the surface of the soil to dry for several days, weather permitting.

STORAGE

Careful drying means good long-term storage. An hour or two in the sun does no harm, but after that lay the bulbs (tops and all) in a single layer—a propped-up window screen works well here—in a dry, shaded spot, such as an airy garden shed, carport or barn; it's best if the bulbs don't get wet. In 10 to 14 days, they should be completely dry. Then, using secateurs, trim tops back a few centimetres from the bulbs, and gently rub the bulbs to remove dirt and loose skin. Store the bulbs at room temperature or lower, somewhere not too humid (and not in the fridge).