



Campaign for School Gardening



Crop Sheet: Onions

Description

Latin name: *Allium cepa*

Allium = Latin for garlic, cepa = Latin for onion.

Onions are bulbs. Bulbs are underground storage organs with a central stem surrounded by fleshy leaves.

They can be grown from seed or from 'sets', which are just young onions. There are several colours of onion including yellow, brown, red, white and pink.

The onion family includes garlic, leeks, chives, spring onions and shallots.



History

The onion is one of the oldest known vegetables in the world, dating back to 3500BC. It is believed that the onion originated in Asia. It has been grown as an edible crop for a long time as it is one of the few foods that would keep well in the winter months.

It is said that the ancient Egyptians worshipped the onion believing that its spherical shape and concentric rings symbolized eternity. Carvings of onions have been found on Egyptian tombs.

In ancient Greece, athletes ate lots of onions to 'lighten the balance of the blood'.

During Roman times, the onion became a staple in the Roman diet. Gladiators were rubbed down with onion juice to firm up their muscles.

As well as being an important food, during the Middle Ages physicians prescribed onions to alleviate headaches, snakebites, and even hair loss! During this time onions were such an important food to the Europeans that they were used as currency to pay for essentials such as rent and were even given as gifts.

Interesting Facts About Onions



Surrounding leaves

Central stem

If you cut an onion in half length-ways you should be able to see the central stem, surrounded by the layers of leaves.

Today, onions continue to be an important part of our diet, used raw, cooked, dried or pickled in many savoury dishes. Eating onions may help to prevent coughs and colds, as they contain vitamins and antioxidants. If you have freezing toes in the winter you could try rubbing a piece of onion on your feet, as it is believed that will help circulation (although you will end up with smelly feet!).

Onions contain sulphur compounds which is why they can make you cry when you cut them. Techniques used by chefs to minimise the tears include leaving the root base on until last, cutting them in running water or sprinkling vinegar on their chopping boards.

(Sources: 'Grow Your Own Veg' by Carol Klein/ RHS; 'Food Plants of the World' by Ben-Erik van Wyk, The New Oxford Book of Food Plants' by J.C. Vaughan & C.A. Geissler and website [British Onions www.onions.org.uk/facts/facts.htm](http://www.onions.org.uk/facts/facts.htm)).

(Photographs: Taken by & copyright RHS/ Open Future growit project & Fiona Secrett. Thanks to Barnham & St Paul's schools).



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How to Grow Onions (from sets)

Growing conditions

Onions like an open site with fertile, well dug soil.

(i.e. soil that contains nutrients, for example from adding school/ home made compost). Onions grow best on a site in full sun. Keep well watered when required, do not water when the bulbs have swollen as this may impair ripening and storage.

When to grow

Plant over-wintering 'sets' from September-November. These are best for schools as they grow within a school year and can be harvested before the summer holidays. These are available to buy in the autumn check the packaging for planting times.

Sets can also be planted in mid March-mid April for a later harvest in August/ September.

Onion sets are easy to obtain from garden centres and plant suppliers' catalogues/ websites. Sets are great to grow with younger pupils as their larger size makes them easier to handle than small seeds.

How to grow

Plant in rows with 10cm between each set. If growing more than one row then allow 20-30cm between rows. You could mark out your row using a line and the tip of the hoe as shown in this photograph.

Each set should be gently pushed into the soil so you can just see the tip (depth 2-3cm).

Harvesting

Harvest from June onwards.

The tops of the onions will turn yellow and start to die down, allow them to die down fully before lifting.

Lift carefully using a fork to gently loosen the soil around the bulbs but not forking the bulbs themselves.



Onions should be placed on netting, wire, sacking or trays to dry out properly in the sun. In schools they could be dried on a sunny windowsill, as outside they will need to be covered in rainy weather. Once dried they can be plaited, hung in bunches or stored in net bags.

Pest and Disease Problems

Onions are usually pest free but occasionally onion fly will tunnel bulbs and thrips cause speckled foliage. The damage is seldom that serious. Downy mildew disease is very damaging in wet weather but there is no remedy but to cut off mouldy foliage. If you are unlucky enough to have onion white rot in your soil you can grow onions in tubs of John Innes No3 compost to avoid the bulb rotting that this disease causes. Onion neck rot can cause the bulbs to rot in store so check stored bulbs regularly and discard any rotted ones.

Onions occasionally bolt or produce flower shoots without producing a bulb. When this happens you have probably planted too early, so plant a little later in future years. (Refer to RHS website gardening advice for examples of pests and diseases).

Varieties to try: Over-wintering cultivars include: 'Radar', 'Senshyu Yellow', 'Swift', 'Sonic', 'Electric' (red).

Spring cultivars include: 'Jet Set' AGM, 'Red Baron', 'Setton' and 'Sturon' AGM.

(Sources: RHS Fruit & Vegetable Gardening by Michael Pollock & RHS Website 'Grow Your Own Veg': www.rhs.org.uk/vegetables/crops/index.asp)