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AUG 16 1979

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Onions, Leeks, Shallots, Chives and Garlic for Home Gardens

Arthur J. Walz, Area Extension Potato Specialist

The lily family supplies us with some food plants, the most important of which are onions, garlic and asparagus. Other members of this family include foods for seasoning like leeks, shallots and chives. You can use some members of this group anytime during the growing season.

Onions and related plants will grow in most Idaho gardens. Onions will grow largest in southwestern Idaho. Elevation, latitude and weather affect size. Since individual onion varieties are not adapted to varied climatic conditions, you should conduct trials to find the best varieties for your garden.

Onion growth is based on the length of daylight required for a specific onion cultivar to produce a mature bulb. Onion varieties are listed as requiring short-day-length or long-day-length hours to produce mature bulbs. Since Idaho summer days exceed 15 hours of light, long-day-length onions will grow and produce good bulbs. Usually a long-day-length onion will not start to form a bulb until the daily temperature averages 60°F.

Plants of the onion family do best on well-drained soils. Onions need a fertile soil but do not use high rates of nitrogen. Use Idaho Current Information Series 315, *Idaho Fertilizer Guide: Onions*, and Idaho CIS 265, *Fertilizer Tips for Gardeners*, to plan your nitrogen needs.

Onions have a shallow root system. Light, frequent irrigations are better than occasional soaking irrigation. Onion roots seldom grow deeper than 18 inches, so wetting below the 18 inch level is wasting irrigation water. Onions also continually generate new roots which require moisture around the root area to obtain the greatest possible growth.

Onion maggots are the major insect pest of onions. Onion thrips can also become a problem. Idaho CIS 226, *Garden Vegetable Insect Control*, gives helpful information for controlling these pests.

Onions

The main long-day-length onions grown in Idaho are the various strains and hybrids of Yellow Sweet Spanish, Downing Yellow Globe, Yellow and White Ebenezer, Southport White Globe and Southport Red Globe. All of these onion varieties will produce large bulbs that will store for winter use.

You can grow onions from seed planted in the garden, from transplants or from onion sets. Transplants and onion sets are available at garden supply stores. You can also start transplants by planting seed in plant flats or flower pots. Plant seed in late December or early January in a warm spot in the home where plants will have plenty of light. Then set out the young plants in the garden the same time as you do cabbages, etc.

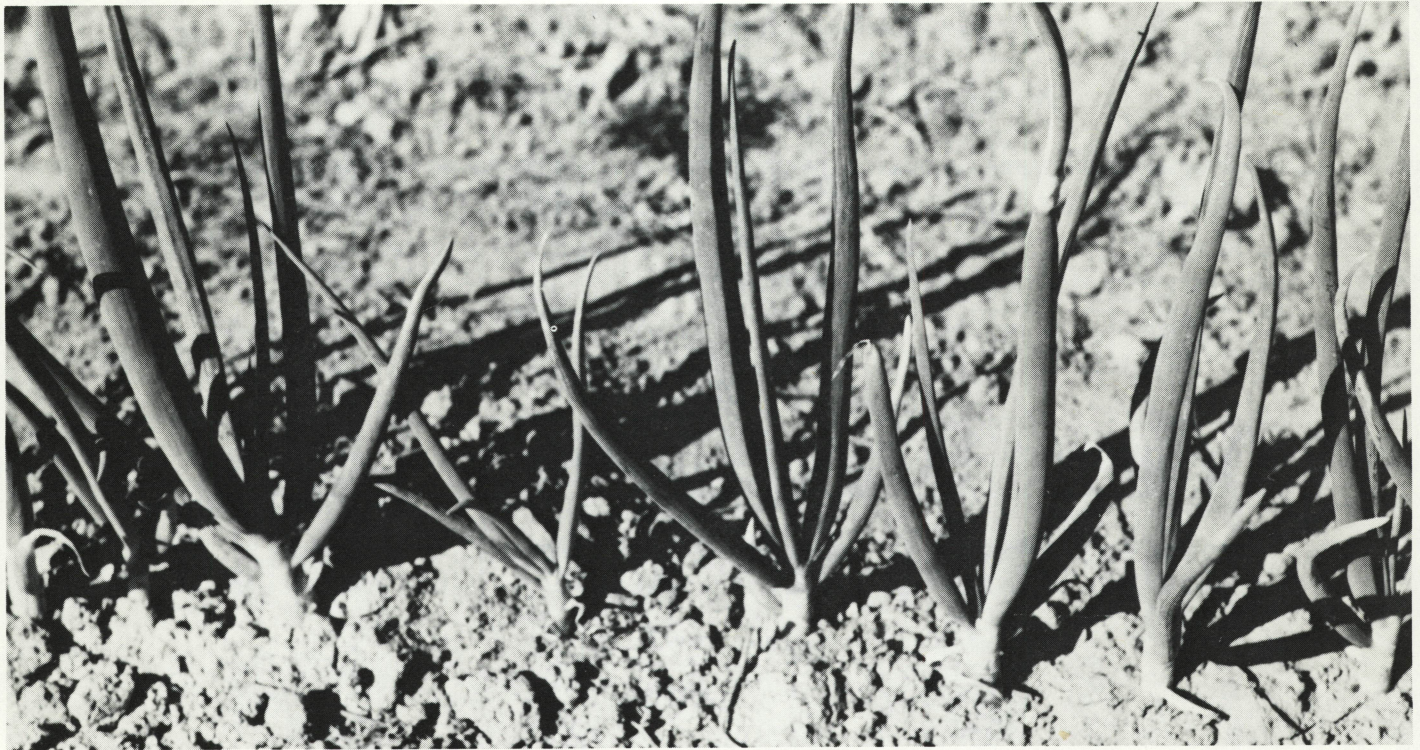
You can also raise transplants in a garden by planting seed about the middle of August and letting the plants overwinter there. Lift the overwintered plants and replace them at cabbage planting time in the spring.

Plant onions to be grown from seed in early April. The earlier the planting, the larger the bulbs will become. Plant onion seed from 1/2- to 3/4-inch deep and keep the soil moist until they are up. Many gardeners plant radish seed in the same furrow at the same time the onions are seeded. Radishes come up first and help loosen any soil crusting that may form, thus helping the weaker onion plants to emerge. Radishes will be used long before the onion plants attain much size.

Space onions grown for bulbs 4 to 5 plants to the foot in a row. Thin seeded onions to the desired stand after the plants are big enough to use in a relish dish or in salads.

Onion sets or transplants will produce larger bulbs in the shorter growing areas of Idaho than will onions grown from seed.

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Onions properly spaced in the row for growing large bulbs for storage.

Onion bulbs will store well if they are properly matured and cured. To help onions mature, terminate irrigation between August 10 to 15. As the soil dries down the onions will start to mature. The nutrients in the leaves will move to the bulb, the neck will weaken and the tops will fall down. When 25 to 50 percent of the tops are down, undercut the onion roots or lift the bulbs for curing. Lay the tops over the bulbs to prevent sunburning.

Also braid or tie together the tops of the onion and dry bunches of onions in a well ventilated shed out of direct sunlight. After the onion tops have dried for 2 weeks, remove them by cutting. Store onion bulbs in onion bags or open-slatted boxes placed in a dry-cool place. Onions will store best when raised off a floor and also where dry air can circulate around them.

Onion Pearls

Onion pearls or onions grown to produce small bulbs to be used for pickling or special purposes come in both short-day-length and long-day-length varieties.

Short-day-length onion varieties are Grano, Crystal Wax, Early Crystal Wax and Eclipse. These onions will form bulbs in late June and will be ready to harvest about mid-July. Plants will not grow large in Idaho.

Long-day-length onion varieties that also grow good pearls are White Lisbon, White Ebenezer or Southport White Globe. These onions will mature about mid-August.

The secret of growing pearl onions is to plant the seed quite close together. Seed in rows or broadcast. One way to broadcast the seed is to scrape off and remove soil to about $\frac{1}{2}$ inch deep over the area to be used. Broadcast the seed so they are spaced $\frac{3}{4}$ to 1 inch from each other in all directions

and then replace the soil. Keep the area moist until the onion plants have emerged.

Harvest pearl onions and cut off tops and roots using a sharp knife. To remove the tough outer skin, use a brief hot water blanch and squeeze the skin off much like squirting olive pits between your fingers.

Leeks

Leek leaves are not hollow like an onion leaf but are more like a lily leaf. Leek does not produce a bulb and grows the same way as a bunching onion. The usable portion of the plant may grow to 1 inch or more in diameter. Leek has a mild flavor and can be used raw or cooked the same way as onions.

Different parts of the world grow leek in different ways. Leek can be direct seeded the same way as onion. Plant at the same time and use the same spacings. By planting like onions, the usable portion of the leek plant will attain a length of 3 to 5 inches.

Grow longer stalks by either planting the seed in deep furrows or using transplants. Plant seed in furrows 5 to 6 inches deep and then gradually fill in the furrows as the leek plants grow. Start transplants in plant flats or flower pots in mid-December to mid-January. Then drop transplants into 1 inch diameter holes made 6 inches deep in the garden. Add water in each hole to help the transplant root down, but do not fill the hole.

Both of these methods cause the usable portion of the leek plant to elongate. The harvested plant will be blanched white and attractive. Cut blanched leek stalks in half lengthwise and thoroughly wash them to remove dirt.



Onions braided for curing in a shaded, well ventilated place.



Garlic spaced for good production.

Chives

Chives look like small onions. They do not produce usable bulbs but are grown for their tender, mild flavored leaves. Chives start out as a single plant and then form clumps of plants by growing many new plants from the root zone. Since chives will grow in one spot for years, grow them in an herb garden or in a spot reserved for perennial plants. Chives will produce best if the clumps are separated and transplanted every 3 years.

Start chives either from seed or starter plants purchased at a garden supply store. Pick a spot in the garden that warms up first as chives start growing early in the year.

To harvest chives over a long period, remove the flower buds as they form. For use through the winter, transplant chives to a flower pot late in the season. Place the pots in a sunny window to keep the chives growing during the winter.

You can also dry or freeze chives for later use. Use scissors or a sharp knife to cut the leaves into 1/2-inch lengths for either drying or freezing. Chives retain flavor better if they are frozen.

Shallots

Shallots possess a special flavor. They are easy to raise and can be grown anywhere onions can be grown. Shallots grow and increase in numbers by forming many bulbs around the mother bulb. The bulbs do not attain much size but are larger than pearl onions.

Shallot mother bulbs produce bigger bulbs when planted in the fall of the year. Plant shallot bulbs in September by placing them in trenches about 2 inches deep, spacing the bulbs 4 to 6 inches apart in the row and covering them up. You can also plant early in the spring to produce a good crop.

Shallots start growth early in the year. They can be used the same as onions anytime during their growth period. The leaves can be used in salads or in cooked dishes. Shallots mature in early August. Lift bulbs at the same time as onions and cure and store the same way.

Select large bulbs for planting back into the garden in September.

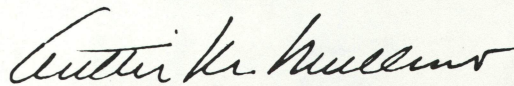
Garlic

Garlic, next to onions in importance as a food, is used as a condiment to season other foods. Garlic can be grown wherever onions are grown.

Garlic does not produce true seed, therefore, it is propagated the same way as shallots. Separate the clumps of cloves or toes into individual bulbs and plant them back the same as with shallots. Plant the mother clove in September to get maximum yields. You can plant garlic early in the spring of the year but the yield will be less than for a fall-planted crop.

Garlic commences growth early in the season and matures early. Most garlic is mature after mid-July. Use garlic anytime after it starts to mature. Lift and store it with onions. Use the large cloves or toes to plant back in the garden in September.

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Auttis M. Mullins
Dean, College of Agriculture
University of Idaho



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