

# ONION

Gardening tips provided by  
Jefferson Farm & Gardens

## Overview

The onion, *Allium cepa*, is a cool season vegetable of the onion family and is related to garlic, shallots, and leeks. The onion played a very important role in Egyptian times, becoming an object of worship. The concentric rings of the onion symbolized eternity and were even buried with Egyptian pharaohs. Today onions are used to enhance flavor of many recipes.

## Choosing Varieties

There are many varieties of onions available that differ in days until maturity, shape of onion bulb, and color, as well as other traits. Onions are divided into several categories. Short-day onions develop bulbs in no more than 12 hours of sunlight and are grown in the South, while long-day varieties need 14 hours or more of sunlight to stimulate bulb development, which are better suited for northern climates. Intermediate-day and day-neutral varieties can be grown throughout the country.

Long-day, intermediate-day, or day-neutral onion varieties are recommended when growing north of 36° latitude (roughly the Kansas/Oklahoma border). A few suggested varieties for Missouri include:

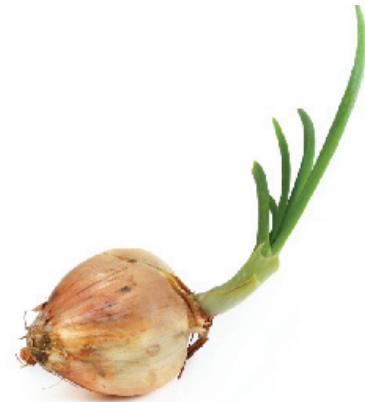
- Copra (globe shaped, stores well)
- Red Burgermaster (globe shaped, red)
- Candy (round, extra sweet)
- Walla Walla Sweet (round, sweet/mild flesh)

It is recommended to try a few varieties to determine overall plant performance and personal preference.

## Planting Tips

For best results, onion sets or onion transplants should be planted in the garden. Onion sets are grown from seed sown closely together the previous year and don't often come in varieties, just red, white, and yellow. When choosing sets, be sure to select bulbs about the size of a dime. Transplants are only 8-10 weeks old and have a head start compared to direct seeding or planting sets.

In Missouri, onion sets or seedlings can be planted in mid-March. Onion sets should be planted about 1 inch deep and 3-4 inches apart in rows with about 6 inches between rows. Onion transplants can be spaced the same as onion sets.



## Soil Fertility and Pest Control

Onion sets or seedlings should be planted in well-drained soils and would benefit from the addition of nutrients either in the form of a complete fertilizer or aged compost. The soil should be loose and crumbly to allow the bulbs to form properly.

After the plants are established, a thin layer of mulch can be placed over the rows to moderate soil temperatures, retain moisture, and control weeds. Onion plants should receive enough water to keep them vigorously growing without waterlogging the soil.

Onion thrips have been known to attack onion foliage and leave light-colored blotches on leaves. Insecticidal soaps can be used to control thrips (be sure to follow product labels).

To prevent neck and root rot, be sure to rotate members of the onion family with other crops each year.

## Harvesting

Onions are edible at any stage of growth. Green onions can be harvested when the stems are about ½ inch in diameter. Onions that send up a flower stalk should be used first because they do not store well. When onion tops turn yellow and fall over, the onions can be pulled and placed on screens (for air circulation) sheltered from rain until the skins are dry, at least two weeks. The bulbs should not be washed or peeled before storing.

## Seed Sources

Sets or plants are available in the spring at local garden centers. Onion sets or plants can also be ordered from mail order companies via phone or website. Burpee Seeds (1-800-888-1447, burpee.com) and Territorial Seed Company (1-800-626-0866, territorialseed.com) are two companies that sell onion varieties.

Written by Catherine Bohnert, Horticulture Specialist. Additional guidesheets at [www.jeffersonfarm.org](http://www.jeffersonfarm.org). Copyright 2008.