

# Avoiding onion bolt



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**Q**uestion: Why did my onions go to seed last summer and how can I avoid that this year?

**A**nswer: If you are growing onions for storage, some will bolt (go to seed) no matter what you do, but there are things you can do to reduce the number that bolt.

All alliums (onions) are biannual, that is they grow vegetatively the first year (this is what we want), go dormant in the winter and then bolt the second summer. Our desire is to grow good-sized bulbs that first year, force them to go dormant, cure them and then eat them.

Onion varieties are divided into three groups: long day, intermediate day and short day. In our latitude we grow only long day varieties. A bit further south they grow intermediate day and short day varieties are grown in the southern US.

Growing the wrong variety will result in bolting.

Starting your onions from seed indoors early in February and planting them out as soon as they get about nine inches tall will get you headed in the right direction. Onions are heavy feeders with short roots. Plant them out in rich soil with an ample water supply nearby.

Start the harvest as soon as half of the onion stems have folded over. When the folding over starts, stop irrigation and when half have folded over, manually fold the rest of them over. Wait a week or so then harvest them all. They need to be cured before putting them into storage.

To cure them, do not cut the stems or roots. Lay them out on a screen or hang them in small bunches out of direct sunlight, out of the dew and in a place where there is great air flow. Allow them to cure until they rustle when moved (i.e., super dry).

If your onions start to bolt, go ahead and harvest them as soon as you see the flower spike. These onions are perfectly good to consume, but will not store well.

If you start onions from sets, they will bolt more frequently than those grown from seeds. Obviously, onion sets have grown for a portion of a year and been forced into dormancy. So, it is logical that they will bolt.

Sets are grown and treated in a way to reduce this bolting, but this process is not perfect. The good news is growing onions from sets is nearly



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Most onions grown in Oregon are long-day onions. Long day onions need about 14-15 hours of daylight to bulb.



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Onions grown as sets will bolt more frequently than those grown from seeds.

100% successful and you can eat those that bolt as fresh onions.

If the onion plant experiences extreme stress, it will trigger the bolting response. These stresses include late frost events, drought, excessive weeds, and very hot weather. Anything that causes the plant to stop growing can trigger the bolting response. Do what you can avoid these stresses.

But growing storage onions is not the only way to grow your own onions. You can seed salad/bunching onions indoors year-round and interplant them with any low-growing vegetable like lettuce, spinach and beet root after they get about nine inches tall.

I seed them in small six pack modules with three to five seeds per

module every few weeks year-round. I plant the whole module out intact and harvest all the onions from that module when needed.

You can also seed bulbing onions in August. Plant them out later in the fall when they get about nine inches tall. They will get established before winter sets in and take off in the spring.

Once they start to bulb up in April, you can start harvesting them to eat them as fresh onions. If they get too mature in the fall or the winter is too harsh, they will want to bolt. To avoid this, as soon as the onion bulbs get to an acceptable size, stop irrigation, bend the stems, harvest and cure. These will not store as long as the summer grown onions but will store for a while.

You can also grow leeks as an onion substitute.

Onions are very climate-sensitive and there are a lot of micro climates in the Umpqua Valley. Keep good notes on when you seed, how they progressed through the season, and the results of your harvest. Make small changes to your seeding dates based on the previous few years' notes.

*Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at [douglasmg@oregonstate.edu](mailto:douglasmg@oregonstate.edu) or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.*