

Choose the right onion type for large bulbs

Question: A client called the OSU Plant Clinic with a few questions.

Why can't I get my onions to form a bulb? Is it best to plant onion seeds, onion transplants or onion sets in the garden?



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Answer: If you have

ever planted onions only to grow a lackluster harvest of small bulbs, your growing technique may not be the issue. You may have started with the wrong onion. There are three types of onions, each one best suited for a certain part of the country. If you plant the wrong one, you may not have much of a harvest. Here's how to tell which onion is right for you.

Onions are photoperiodic plants and form bulbs in response to day-length. When the number of daylight hours reaches a certain level, onion plants start forming bulbs. Long-day onions need about 14 to 15 hours of daylight to bulb and are suited for our area. Short-day onions need 10 hours of daylight and generally, do not perform well in our area. Day-neutral onions form bulbs regardless of daylight hours and produce well in almost any region. As soon as day-length hits the 10-hour mark, a short-day onion starts forming a bulb. If the top of the plant hasn't had enough time to grow big and lush, the resulting bulb will be small. Conversely, if you live where day length never hits 14 hours, long-day onions will never form a bulb. All you'll get are green leaves. By choosing the right type of onion for your area,

you'll get healthy green stems that are large enough to form fat and tasty bulbs.

Onions may be planted from seeds, from small bulbs called sets, or from transplants.

Planting Onions from Sets:

Growing green onions from sets is probably the simplest

method for the home gardener. The plants are quickly established. Onion sets may be used to produce both green onions and dry onion bulbs; however, onions grown from sets do not make the best bulbs for storage. Purchase firm, dormant sets early – before they begin growth in heated sales rooms. Store sets in a cool, dry, dark environment if planting must be delayed after purchase. It is also recommended that when using sets, avoid sets that are more than 5/8 inches in diameter, as they are likely to bolt. Late plantings are more susceptible to cold or freeze injury. Planting too early can result in increased seed stem production and small bulbs.

Planting Onions from Seed: Growing onions from seed is the least expensive method, but it takes longer before the onions are ready. Sow eight to 12 seeds per foot of row, 1/2 to 3/4 inches deep. If larger bulbs are desired, thin to 4 inches apart and eat the thinned plants as green onions.

Planting Onions from Transplants: Transplanting young onion seedlings is the method of growing that most regularly produces large, dry, attractive onions for slicing and storage. Plants should be about 6 inches high and about half



COURTESY PHOTO

Tiny bulbs can be the result of mismatched climate and onion type. Choose long-day onions for best results in our area.

the thickness of a pencil at the time of transplanting. Set plants with the bottom of the plant about 1 to 1½ inches below the surface of the soil. Transplants should be spaced 3 to 4 inches apart in the row. When you obtain onion plants, they should be dry. Do not wet them or stick their roots in soil or water. Unpack and store plants in a cool, dry place until ready to plant. Properly stored onion plants will last up to three weeks. Transplants are purchased in bundles (usually 60 to 80 plants) from garden stores and through seed and nursery catalogs.

You can grow your own transplants by seeding in pots and transplanting your onions in the spring when the plants are about 6" tall and soils have warmed up. This method allows you to choose from many different varieties, produces the best bulbs for storage, and is the cheapest method of all.

The varieties of onions that grow best in our area are long-day varieties including: Walla Walla (not good for long term

storage), Redwing, Ailsa Craig, Ruby Ring, Copra, Patterson, Cortland, Talon, and Red Bull. Day-neutral varieties include: Red Candy Apple, Candy and Superstar.

Onions grow best in full sunlight and well-drained soil. Before planting incorporate 4-6 inches of well-composted organic matter and an all-purpose fertilizer to a depth of 6-8 inches. When the plants have 5-6 leaves, scatter fertilizer around the plants and water it in to help grow larger plants and bigger bulbs. Onions require regular watering. Watering once a week usually is enough in the spring, but you may need to water more often during dry weather. Water your onions slowly and deeply to help grow strong, healthy roots. Stop watering when the plants begin to mature to help the curing process. Organic mulches help conserve water, supply extra nutrients and reduce weeding. Onions vary in their maturity times. Green onions may be harvested as early as 50 days after seeding. Bulb onions generally require 100-120 days to mature. Leave bulb onions in the ground until the tops fall over. Once the tops fall over, lift the bulbs, but let them dry or cure for another 2-3 weeks before placing them into storage.

Do you have a gardening question? Please email, call, or visit the Douglas County Master Gardener Plant Clinic at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu, 541-672-4461, or 1134 S.E. Douglas Ave., Roseburg.

Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.