

# Growing Your Own

## A beginner's guide to gardening

# Onions

**O**nions are a popular garden vegetable used in countless recipes. They are planted early in spring and harvested in mid to late summer.

## Types

Onions can be divided into three types. Green onions grow close together in bunches but do not form a big bulb. They are mainly used for their green tops and are also called scallions. Dry or globe onions grow medium-sized, dense bulbs with a stronger flavor. They can be stored for many months. Sweet onion types also have bulbs, but they do not store for very long. They are best eaten within a month or two of harvest. Onions can be white, yellow, or red (may appear purple).

## Varieties

These recommended varieties grow well in Kentucky:

### Green (Bunching)

- Evergreen White Bunching
- Parade
- Ishikura

### Sweet

- Candy (yellow)
- Cabernet (red)
- Red Candy Apple (red)
- Sierra Blanca (white)

### Dry (Storage)

- Patterson (yellow)
- Red Bull (red)
- Super Star (white)



Evergreen Hardy White  
bunching onion  
*Johnny's Selected Seeds*



Cabernet  
*Johnny's Selected Seeds*



Sierra Blanca  
*Johnny's Selected Seeds*



Super Star  
*All-America Selections*

# Bulb Onion Planting

	<b>Row Spacing</b>	12–18 inches apart		
	<b>Plant Spacing</b>	2–4 inches apart		
	<b>Final Bulb Spacing</b>	3–4 inches apart		
<b>Depth</b>	<b>Seeded</b> ¼–½ inch	<b>Transplants</b> 1 inch	<b>Sets</b> 1–2 inches	
<b>Region</b>	<b>Seeded</b>	<b>Safe Planting Dates</b>		<b>Sets</b>
<b>Eastern Kentucky</b>	April 1–June 1	April 1–June 15		March 15–22
<b>Central Kentucky</b>	March 20–June 15	March 25–July 1		March 10–17
<b>Western Kentucky</b>	March 10–July 1	March 15–July 15		March 1–7

## Day length

Bulb onions are grouped as short-day, intermediate (day-neutral), and long-day varieties, because they grow bulbs depending on how many hours of daylight they get. In Kentucky, it is best to grow intermediate (day-neutral) or long-day onions, including the varieties mentioned in this publication. Intermediate onions in Kentucky will grow long enough to form good-sized bulbs. The listed varieties are recommended, but other day-neutral or long-day onions may also do well.

## How much to plant

A 10-foot row of onions can grow about 10 pounds of onion bulbs. That is more than three bags of onions from the store. Plant more if you want to harvest and store onions.

Ten to 20 green onion plants are enough for most families, if you harvest only leaves and leave the plants to regrow.

## How and when to plant

Plant onions in well-drained soil in full sun to partial shade. Onions can be planted in early spring as soon as the soil is workable. Onions grow best with additional nutrients. Consider adding a slow-release fertilizer or compost at planting.

Onions can be grown from seeds, transplants, or sets.

Start seeds indoors in January to grow transplants, or plant seeds directly in the garden after the safe planting date. Storage onions are best grown from seed or transplant.



Onion sets  
*Johnny's Selected Seeds*



Onion transplants  
*UK CSA*





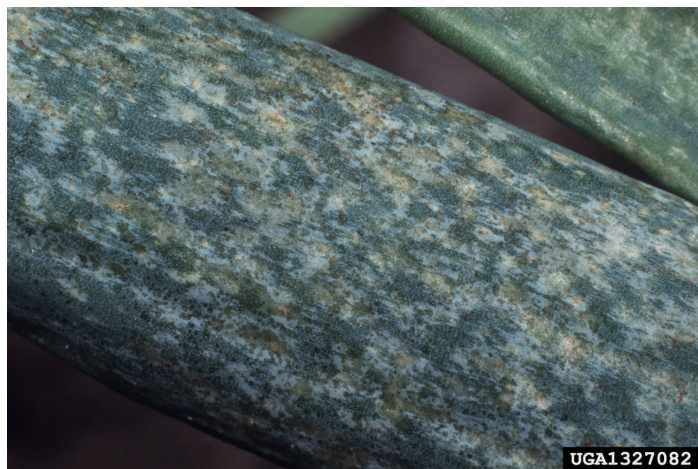
Green onions  
UK CSA

**Transplants** are small onions grown from seed, and light frost usually does not hurt them. Transplants can be put out in the garden about four weeks before the last frost. Separate transplants that are sold in pots and space them according to the chart. If you order transplants, they are shipped dry, but will quickly green up again once planted. When planting, cover the roots and one inch of the transplant with soil.

**Sets** are small, partially grown onion bulbs from the previous growing season. They can survive cold spring temperatures. Plant small sets (marble-sized) to grow bigger onions. Larger sets will send up seed stalks before they form large bulbs. Harvest larger sets like you would harvest green onions.



Onion thrips and damage  
Ric Bessin, University of Kentucky



Close-up of thrips feeding damage on onion leaf  
Alton N. Sparks, Jr., University of Georgia, Bugwood.org, CC BY 3.0

Green onions can grow from seed, set, or transplant. You can even replant the green onions bought at the grocery store in the produce section. Cut off the tops to cook with but leave several inches above the roots. Put the lower part with roots in a glass of water for a couple days and then plant the green onions in a container or in the garden. They will grow new green tops.

## Pests and disease

Onions are not bothered by many pests. If you notice your plants are not growing well or see little worms in the bulb or stalk, you may have onion root maggots. If you notice tiny, speckled holes or twisted leaves, you may have thrips. Please see the UK Cooperative Extension publication *Home Vegetable Gardening in Kentucky* (ID-128) at <https://publications.ca.uky.edu/id-128> or contact your Extension agent for information on dealing with pests.





Harvesting green onions  
UK CSA



Freshly harvested onions starting to cure  
UK CSA



Cured onions ready to store  
UK CSA

## Harvesting

To harvest green onions, cut some of the tops as needed and allow the rest of the plant to continue growing for repeated harvests. Alternatively, you can harvest the plants completely by pulling them out of the ground when the tops are at least six inches high.

You can pull up and cook a fresh bulb onion whenever it looks big enough to use.

To harvest for storage, carefully pull bulb onions when about two-thirds of the tops have fallen over. Handle onions gently. Bruised onions do not keep well. Tops can be left on or cut off.

Onions need to cure (dry) before storage. You can fold the tops over the bulbs and leave them out to cure in place. Or you can cure onions inside away from direct sunlight. Spread them out on a screen or table or braid the tops together and hang small bunches to dry. Curing takes a few days or a few weeks, depending on the weather. The onions are cured when the skin, roots, and leaves turn dry and brown. To test to see if it is dried, cut the leaves an inch above the bulb. If there is no green, they are fully cured.

## Storing bulb onions

Keep any soft, bruised, or thick-necked onions separate and use them first.

Remove all but three-quarters of an inch of the tops. Put onions in mesh bags, wooden crates with slatted sides, or other slatted storage that gives good airflow. Onions will not store well in the refrigerator. Braided onions can be stored hanging. Store in a cool, dark place. Sweet onions can keep for a couple months. Storage onion types can keep until the next summer. Regularly check onions and remove soft onions to use.

Once cut, an onion will keep for a few days in the refrigerator. Onions can also be cut up and frozen with no further preparation, to be used in soups or other cooked dishes.

## Serving

Onions are a great source of vitamins, minerals, and fiber. They contain chemicals that help fight many chronic diseases like cancer, heart disease, and diabetes. In addition to their health benefits, onions are the base of many recipes in almost every cuisine around the world. Onions can be eaten raw, cooked, grilled, pickled, and powdered. They are used in soups, salads, sauces, and relishes. Onions can be stuffed, roasted, boiled, fried, or sauteed.

To use bulb onions, remove the outer skin. To minimize stinging eyes while cutting onions, try chilling the onions first. You can also try slicing off the top and removing the outer layers without cutting through the roots. (The root end has the most chemicals that make your eyes water.)

To use green onions, peel off any dry outer layers and yellowed leaves. Cut off the roots and tops of the leaves. Cut and use the leaves and white parts either fresh or cooked.

## Clean up

Pull out any remaining plants. Compost healthy plant material. Throw away any diseased plants.



Bulb onion with roots removed and one-half peeled

*Erika Olsen, University of Kentucky*



Some recipes call for chopped green onions. Both the white and green parts can be used.

*Erika Olsen, University of Kentucky*

## Summary

### Varieties

Onions can be white, yellow, or red. Green (bunching) onions are mostly grown for their tender green leaves. There are also sweet onions and storage onions. Both grow a large bulb, but sweet onions will only keep for a month or two.

### How much to plant

A 10-foot row of sweet or storage onions will produce about 10 pounds of bulbs.

### How and when to plant

Plant onions in early spring four to six weeks before the last frost. Onions can be grown from seed, transplants, or sets.

### Pests and diseases

Watch for thrips and root maggots.

### Harvesting

Green onions can be harvested regularly. Bulb onions are ready to harvest when about two-thirds of the tops are falling over. Gently pull. Cure the onions before storage.

### Storing

Onions can be hung in small bunches or stored flat. Keep in a cool, dark, dry place, but not in the refrigerator. Whole onions can keep for many months. Cut onion can be frozen or kept in the refrigerator for a few days.

### Serving

Bulb and green onions can both be used fresh or cooked in many recipes and almost every cuisine.

### Clean up

Pull out plants at the end of the season and compost or throw away.

### Authors

Erika Olsen, Extension Associate  
Rick Durham, Extension Consumer Horticulture Specialist  
Rachel Rudolph, Extension Vegetable Specialist

### Contributors

Jann Knappage, Food System Specialist  
Rita May, Senior Extension Associate  
Michele West, Marketing and Media Specialist  
Bethany Pratt, Food System Specialist

## Cooperative Extension Service

Agriculture and Natural Resources  
Family and Consumer Sciences  
4-H Youth Development  
Community and Economic Development

## MARTIN-GATTON COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE, FOOD AND ENVIRONMENT

Educational programs of Kentucky Cooperative Extension serve all people regardless of economic or social status and will not discriminate on the basis of race, color, ethnic origin, national origin, creed, religion, political belief, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, pregnancy, marital status, genetic information, age, veteran status, physical or mental disability or reprisal or retaliation for prior civil rights activity. Reasonable accommodation of disability may be available with prior notice. Program information may be made available in languages other than English.  
University of Kentucky, Kentucky State University, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and Kentucky Counties, Cooperating.  
Lexington, KY 40506    Issued 04-2025



Disabilities  
accommodated  
with prior notification.