

Onions are such a versatile vegetable, you would be mad not to be growing them in your garden!

1. Pick your variety

Bulb onions come in three main varieties: brown, red and white.

Brown onions are the most widely used onion. They have a brownish-yellow skin and creamy coloured flesh, with a strong flavour, making them excellent for cooking. Some examples of brown onions include Cream Gold, Australian Brown and Hunter River Brown.

Red onions have purplish-red skin and white flesh tinged with red. They tend to be medium to large in size and have a milder and sweeter flavour. Red onions are often consumed raw in salads or lightly cooked with other foods. They are excellent for adding colour to meals, but they lose some of their redness when cooked. Varieties include Sweet Red and Californian Red.

White onions are generally not as strong in flavour or pungent as brown onions. Milder varieties of white onions are also eaten raw in salads and in sandwiches. Varieties of white onions include Flat White Cipolline and Hunter River White.

Onions are also classified physiologically, by day length during growing season. This information gives you an idea on how long your onions will take to mature.

Short Day varieties require a relatively short amount of daylight (10-12 hours) to bulb and are generally grown in Queensland and New South Wales. Depending on variety and location, planting starts in February through until May and harvest starts in September.

Intermediate varieties require more daylight than short day varieties, but less daylight than long day varieties. They require around 13 to 14 hours per day to bulb up. This type is grown in southern regions of Australia, where planting takes place from May to August, with harvest from November to March. Long day varieties are generally not grown in Australia.

2. Location

Onions need a sunny spot in rich, well-drained soil with a pH of 6.5 to 7 that is not too high in nitrogen. Prior to planting dig in plenty of compost, and a sprinkling of garden lime. Ideally let the beds settle for a week or so before planting. If you are rotating your vegetable crops, then onions love to follow tomatoes or zucchini.

3. Sowing seeds

Onion seeds are short-lived, so start with fresh seeds each year. Sow seed directly into the ground, or into trays indoors. If starting seeds indoors, plant them about 6 weeks before transplanting to the garden. If planting directly into the garden, weed control is imperative early on as the tiny seedlings can quickly be overgrown and crowded out by weeds.

4. Planting out your seedlings

The new seedlings will look like grass and are very delicate. Transplant seedlings once they are big enough to handle, without causing too much damage.

Dig narrow trenches in your previously prepared bed, about 15-20cm apart. You can use the handle of your rake or a decent stick for this. Lay the seedlings in your trenches about 10cm apart. Fill in the trench again, keeping the green of the seedlings above the surface. Onions need to be planted very shallow so the bulb is able to expand easily when it starts to develop.

6. Harvest and Storage

Onions can be harvested as needed as soon as the bulbs are big enough. You can also snip the leafy tops to use as greens at any time. Pull up immature bulbs as spring or green onions for salads. Any onions that send up flower stalks will also need to be pulled up, as this means that the onion has stopped growing. These onions won't store well but can be used in recipes within a few days.

Dig up the main crop of onions when the green tops turn brown and die back. Don't be tempted to pull the bulbs out by the leaves as they may snap off, leaving the onion in the ground. Instead dig them up carefully with a fork.

Leave the freshly picked onions in the sun until the outer skins are dry. In hot, sunny weather this can take just a few hours so watch them carefully or they will scald. However, it can take up to a few days, in cooler weather. Avoid getting them rained on or frosted. Once the outer skins are dry, wipe off any soil, removing the dead tops and roots. Store in a cool, dry place or hang in a mesh bag.

Brown onions can be stored for up to six months, white onions for three and red onions really only for a couple of weeks.



ONION GROWING



5. During the growing season

For the first couple of months, after planting your seedlings, a weekly water with a liquid fertiliser will benefit the plant. Remember to weed gently by hand so as not to disturb the young seedlings. Mulch will help keep the weeds down, however, mulch around the plants but not right over the developing bulbs as they are prone to rotting.

Once the plants start to "bulb-up" water regularly, at soil level, so the onions don't dry out. It can help to scrape the soil away from around the bulbs to about half way down the bulb, so that the soil doesn't restrict the growth of the bulb.

Watch for thrips – tiny insects that feed on new leaves, damaging growth. Keeping the area weed free will help to prevent infestations.



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