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ONION (*Allium cepa*)

Please remove your onion sets from their box as soon as possible. You have received live, dormant bulbs that should be planted as soon as possible—ideally within one week of receiving them. If you cannot plant immediately, store in a cool, dry, and dark place with good ventilation—moisture and heat may cause the bulbs to sprout prematurely. The bulbs are hardy and will thrive when planted if cared for properly.

Onion sets provide an opportunity to fill the gap between last year's storage onions and this year's seed-grown onions. Fall-planted sets can produce a useable crop as early as mid-June and spring-planted sets can produce a useable crop as early as the first weeks of July. For CSAs, farm stands, and home gardeners, onion sets can add diversity to late spring and early summer harvests.

SITE AND SOIL PREPARATION:

Onions require a fertile, well-drained soil with a pH of 6.2–6.8. Sandy loam soils are ideal, so raised beds or raised rows are recommended for heavier soils to promote soil drainage. Full sun is required for optimal growth; avoid planting adjacent to other crops that will shade them. Add compost, balanced fertilizer, or other amendments to the soil prior to planting. Testing your soils on a regular basis will determine what amendments and how much of each is required.

LATITUDE ADAPTATION:

Our onion sets are long-day onions and will not grow well below 37° latitude. To look up your latitude, use the website <https://www.latlong.net/>

PLANTING:

Plant approximately 1 inch deep, with the base of the bulb (the rounded root-end portion of the bulb) facing down, 4 inches apart in rows 12–18 inches apart. If you would like to harvest some of the crop during the growing season as green or fresh onions, space plants closer in-row and harvest every other onion as needed.

For spring planting, plant sets as soon as the soil can be worked.

For fall plantings, plant around the same time you would garlic, before the ground freezes (we plant mid-October through late November in hardiness zone 5a). Irrigate as necessary until the ground freezes. We recommend growing in a low tunnel; cover with row cover once temperatures are consistently dropping below 25°F (-4°C) and add a layer of greenhouse plastic before winter low temperatures set in. Vent the tunnel in spring to avoid excessive heat and remove the covering entirely once the threat of snow has passed and high temperatures are consistently above 25°F (-4°C).

WATERING:

Maintain moderate, consistent soil moisture until the sets are established and foliage begins to sprout. Overwatering at this early stage could cause the sets to rot. Because of their shallow root systems, onions require frequent irrigation. We recommend drip irrigation rather than overhead, which may encourage foliar diseases. Onions generally require 1 inch of water per week, especially during the bulbing stage. When tops begin to fall over, signaling maturity, watering should be discontinued. For fall-planted sets, discontinue irrigation when the ground freezes.

DISEASES, INSECTS, AND WEEDS:

Adequate air circulation will aid in reducing the risk of foliar disease, as do crop rotation and good sanitation—remove all culls and crop debris each season. Thrips are the most common *Allium* crop pest. Reduce thrips' overwintering habitat by keeping fields free of weeds and crop debris. Combat serious thrips infestations with spinosad, pyrethrin, or insecticidal soap (see our Insect Control Chart in our catalog or on our website). Overhead irrigation can also help knock thrips off leaves (however, overhead irrigation can also increase the risk of foliar disease).

Controlling weeds is also critical to the success of your onion crop. Competition from weeds will

reduce yields and encourage insect pest populations. Cultivate carefully so as not to damage the base of the plants and shallow root systems. An application of organic mulch will also help control weeds and preserve moisture.

HARVEST AND STORAGE:

For bunching green onions, harvest once small bulbs have developed.

For full-size onions, the necks will become soft and tops will begin to fall over when mature. At this point, watering should be discontinued. Note that bending the tops over early decreases bulb size. When approximately 50% of the tops have fallen over on their own, pull the onions out of the ground and let dry in the sun for 2–7 days depending on the weather. Lay the tops of one row over the bulbs of another to prevent sunscald. If the weather is rainy, onions can be dried in a barn or shaded greenhouse. When foliage and necks are completely dry, clip roots and cut back tops to 1 inch or braid uncut tops together to group for storage.

Store onions in mesh bags or vented boxes at near freezing with 65–70% relative humidity. If properly cured, onions will store for approximately 3 months. Every few weeks, stored onions should be sorted to eliminate any which may have begun to decay.

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