

Growing Onions from Seeds (published 2025-01-25)

By Wes Walker, Master Gardener

Every spring, many backyard gardeners make their pilgrimage to the local feed store or nursery to purchase their onion sets. These baby bulbs—while very convenient for simply transplanting into your onion bed—are limited in variety. There's nothing wrong with a Texas Sweet, Vidalia, or Walla Walla, but if you want something else, consider growing onions from seeds. Whether it be a Rossa di Milano Italian heirloom, or the Japanese Unzen Early Flat, these exotic Alliums can bring a refreshing change for your garden and table.

Growing onions from seeds is not much different than growing any other garden vegetable, but there are a few differences. In our area (USDA Hardiness Zone 7), March is an appropriate month to plant your onion sets. When growing onions from seed, you'll need to account for the early transplanting nature of onions and plant your seeds 8-10 weeks prior to the last frost date. That means starting your onion seeds indoors in the January/February timeframe.

The first step in growing onions from seeds is selecting the right variety for your region and needs. Onions are classified into three types: short-day onions, long-day onions, and intermediate-day onions.

Short-day onions are best suited for southern climates with mild winters. These need 10-12 hours of daylight to form bulbs. Long-day onions perform best in northern climates with long summer days that provide the required 14-16 hours of daylight. Intermediate-day onions are a good choice for this region, as they need around 12-14 hours of daylight.

As with other vegetables, start with a light, well-draining seed-starting mix, and a seed-germinating container (tray, pot or seed-starter tray) which provides good drainage.

Once your container is filled with the seed-starting mix, moisten the soil and sow the seeds $\frac{1}{4}$ inch deep, then cover lightly with soil. The soil will need to remain consistently moist, but not waterlogged. Place the container in a warm location (68-75°F) to encourage germination.

Once the seeds germinate, they'll need some additional care to grow into healthy transplants. When seedlings are about 2 inches tall, thin them to one seedling per cell or $\frac{1}{2}$ inch apart in trays to avoid overcrowding. You'll also need to provide 12-16 hours of light daily. This can be bright, indirect light, or electric lights. Make sure to keep the soil evenly moist but avoid overwatering that may result in root rot.

As your homemade sets continue to grow above 4", you'll want to give them a "haircut" and trim the tops back to 3". This encourages the plant to grow strong roots, which is the whole point of growing onions. Watch the vegetative growth and your planting calendar to determine when you want to stop trimming the tops. When seedlings are 6-8 inches tall and the weather permits, it's time to move them outdoors.

Like most indoor-started seedlings, the onions will need to be "hardened off" before transplanted. This is a process where young seedlings are gradually exposed to outdoor

conditions for 7-10 days before transplanting. Use this 7–10-day acclimation time to prepare the soil in your planting location. You’ll want a sunny location with well-drained, fertile soil. Amend with compost and ensure the soil pH is between 6.0 and 7.0.

When the onions are ready to be planted outdoors, space seedlings 4-6 inches apart in rows 12-18 inches apart. Plant them at the same depth as they were in the containers. You may also choose to mulch around the plants to retain moisture and suppress weeds.

As your onions continue to mature, you’ll be performing similar care as you do for your other vegetables. The onions will need about an inch of water per week, with possible increases to this during dry, hot spells. Onions are heavy feeders, so you may need to provide some additional food for them during their various growth phases. Lastly, keep your onion beds weeded on a regular basis. The end-product is the onion root, so frequent weeding will reduce the risk of pulling larger weeds and disrupting the onion’s rooting system.

When the tops of your plants begin to fall over and dry, typically in late summer or early fall, it’s time to harvest your crop. Gently lift the onions from the soil using a garden fork or spade. Take care to not damage the onion bulb during extraction.

Once extracted, your onions will need to go through a curing process. Lay the onions in a dry, well-ventilated area for 2-3 weeks. Once the outer skins are dry and papery, trim the tops and roots in preparation for storage. Store your cured onions in a cool, dry, and dark location. Sweet onions have a shorter shelf life and should be used first.

Growing onions from seeds may take some effort, but the results are well worth it. With the right preparation, care, and timing, you’ll enjoy a bountiful harvest of flavorful and exotic onions.

Until next time, keep workin’ th’ dirt!

“Growing Onions in a Home Garden”

<https://extension.umd.edu/resource/growing-onions-home-garden/>

“Onion Production” <https://extension.psu.edu/onion-production>

“Growing Onions” <https://onslow.ces.ncsu.edu/2018/08/growing-onions/>

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