

Autumn Planting Onions

Autumn planting onions are sometimes called Japanese onions and vice versa.

The term 'Onion Set' means an individual onion bulb and in 250grams there will be approximately 60 onion sets.

An onion set is simply an onion which has not been allowed to grow to its full size. Many onion sets are "heat-treated" nowadays to stop them bolting into flower. The heat treatment involves storing the onions in very warm and sterile conditions for about four months which effectively kills a specific part of the onion thereby preventing bolting.

Without a doubt onion sets are the easiest way to plant and ensure a harvest of full-sized onion bulbs. The key advantage which an onion set has over an onion seed comes from the fact that when you plant an onion set it is at a far more advanced stage of growth compared to an onion seed. Therefore they spring into active growth much more reliably and quicker. When planted early they could be ready for harvest in June.

Onion Sets require very little preparation other than the selection of each set which should be firm, discarding any that are damaged or showing foliage growth prior to planting. Also try to select bulbs that are no larger than 19mm(3/4") in diameter which further, reduces the chance of bolting.

Planting in the greenhouse, polytunnel or cold frame can take place in mid-February in plant cell trays (40) in good compost. This way one gets a good start and avoids the birds from causing havoc by lifting the planted sets. Keep undercover until mid April before planting out into their final positions.

There are a number of onion varieties that are reasonably hardy and overwinter in most parts of the UK; Senshyu is one such variety. However, the sets need full sun to put down root growth before going into hibernation until the spring sunshine and increasing day length. Furthermore, whilst onions prefer a firm soil there is always the risk of the sets rotting and being more prone to disease if the ground becomes waterlogged.

In our area the best time to plant onions in autumn is around mid-September. If you plant too early the foliage will be at risk from winter weather damage. If you plant too late the roots will not have time to establish and the plant may not survive when the cold

weather sets in. If planting outside then the sets should be 10cm(4 inches) apart in rows 23cm(9inches) apart.

As a result one has to weigh up the benefits of planting outdoors as opposed to planting early undercover in plant cells.

Onions grow well in fertile, moisture retentive, but well-drained soil in full sun. Should the soil. Consider liming if the soil is acid, pH below 6.5.

Plant outdoors from mid-March to mid-April once the soil is starting to warm up. Onion Sets are traditionally spaced out 100mm to 150mm (4" to 6") apart in rows 25cm to 30cm (10" to 12") apart but if space permits bulb spacing can be increased to assist access for weeding during the season. To avoid damaging the bulb dig a small hole to plant the bulb, leaving just a small tip of the bulb showing above the surface. However, birds can be a nuisance lifting newly planted sets, it is therefore worth covering them with a fleece until well rooted. **Note:** If you are a 1st time grower of onion sets please note that it is essential that the bulb is inserted the right way up with the root base into the soil and the pointed tassel end up.

If planting of sets is delayed open the package and spread the sets out in a cool, well-lit place to prevent premature sprouting.

Growing on and Crop Maintenance

It is important to keep the onion bed weed free as dense weed growth will seriously affect yield. Either hoe or hand weed but if hoeing be careful not to damage the bulb or roots of the plant. Water if the weather is dry but don't overwater as this may introduce Botrytis if you're not careful. Although there should be enough fertiliser in a well prepared onion bed to satisfy the onions growth requirements, if you think they require a little boost then you can give them an occasional high nitrogen feed up until early July. Do not however, be tempted to continue feeding with a high nitrogen feed after the bulbs start to swell as you may end up with soft bulbs which will not store well.

Harvesting

When the onion bulb has matured its foliage will turn yellow and topple over. After approx. 14 days and on a dry day, carefully lift with a fork, remove any excess soil from its root base and leave outside to dry out on an elevated chicken wire surface. If the weather is forecast to be wet then move them undercover to keep them dry and complete the “drying out” process. After approx. 21 days the drying process should be complete and the foliage paper thin.