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Tips for Growing Larger Onions

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Release: Week of Feb. 8, 2021

Onions are easy to grow, but growing large onions can be a challenge. When gardeners turn to Extension for information on how to grow larger onions, here are the tips we teach.

As with most vegetables, it begins with selecting the right variety. With onions, it also helps to start with seed or plants instead of onion sets (small bulbs). And these need to be ordered soon.

While sets are commonly used by gardeners, sets provide an earlier harvest but usually not the largest onions. If sets are used, select the smallest bulbs available. Larger sets are less likely to develop into large onions.

To select the right variety, especially when ordering seed or plants, know there are long-day, intermediate-day and short-day varieties. Long day onion varieties need to be used in Nebraska.

Onion plants begin to form bulbs based on day length. Long-day onions will not form bulbs until there is at least 14 hours of daylight. Intermediate-day onions begin bulb formation at 12 to 14 hours of daylight and short day varieties at 10 to 12 hours.

Logic might make one think the earlier in the season a plant begins to form its bulb, the larger the bulb will eventually grow. But this is not the case so use long day varieties of bulbing, not bunching, onions.

Each leaf on an onion plant relates to a ring on the bulb. The more leaves a plant has, the larger the onion can grow. By planting long day varieties, plants have more time to develop a good root system and more leaves to support bulb growth.

Plant onions in full sun and well-drained soil. While onions are a vegetable that tolerate a small amount of shade, plants need at least 8 to 10 hours of full sun each day.

To encourage growth of leaves and roots, avoid competition between plants and with weeds. Space sets and plants 3 to 4 inches apart. If using seed, thin seedlings to 3 to 4 inches apart.

Onions have very shallow roots compared to many vegetables. Controlling weeds and maintaining consistent moisture along with providing adequate nitrogen is needed.

Mulching or hoeing between rows and hand-pulling weeds within rows are good weed controls. However, due to shallow roots, it is easy to dislodge onions when weeding or thinning so proceed carefully.

Because of shallow roots, frequent irrigation may be needed to keep the upper few inches of soil uniformly moist. When plants are moisture stressed, photosynthesis and plant growth slows.

Since it is through photosynthesis plants produce the sugars and carbohydrates needed to grow, any slowing of this process will reduce growth rate along with plant or onion size.

Onions grow best in rich soil high in organic matter. They benefit from one or two side dressings of nitrogen fertilizer after roots develop. Avoid too much nitrogen as it can delay bulb formation.

One example would be to apply urea (45-0-0) at a rate of 0.25 to 0.5 pound per 25 feet of row. Spread the fertilizer along onion rows, about six inches away from plants, and scratch it into the soil.

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When browsing the tomato section of garden catalogs, or transplants at garden centers, you might notice the term 'indeterminate' in their description. Indeterminate tomatoes are what most home gardeners grow. Indeterminate tomatoes continue to grow and set fruit up until frost, unless killed by disease. Because of continuous growth, these varieties can reach up to 6 feet tall; and they are best staked or caged to provide plant support. And, keeping the foliage off the ground will slow disease infection and spread. In contrast, determinate tomato varieties usually reach a set size and produce a lot of fruit at one time. These varieties are commonly used by commercial growers, such as for canning. Another type of tomato available to homeowners are semi-determinate plants. These reach a smaller size than the indeterminate varieties, but they will continue to set fruit up until frost, making them a good choice for home gardens.

Onions are easy to grow, but growing large onions can be a challenge. To grow larger onions, start with seeds or plants instead of sets. Onion sets provide an earlier harvest but usually not larger onions. When ordering seed or plants, select long day varieties. Do not use short day onions in Nebraska. Onion plants begin to form bulbs based on day length. Long-day onions will not form bulbs until after there is at least 14 hours of daylight. This allows plants to develop good roots and foliage that will better support bulb growth. Each onion leaf relates to a ring on the bulb. The more leaves there are, the larger the onion can grow. Along with starting long day varieties from seed or plants, plant onions in full sun, thin young plants three to four inches apart and remember onions have shallow roots. Controlling weeds and maintaining good moisture along with adequate nitrogen is needed to grow the largest onions.

I'm usually asked how to control white clover in a lawn. Recently I was asked how to start white clover in a lawn. When it comes to clover, people either hate it or love it. It is a plant that can be tolerated in lawns due to its low growth not affected by mowing and white flowers. Benefits of white clover include it is a legume that fixes nitrogen in soil; and the blooms attract pollinators. At one time, white clover was even included in lawn seed mixes. If you'd like to try clover in a lawn, know it will be difficult to remove once established and may take over areas where it is difficult to grow grass. To establish clover, simply allow what's there to grow; or seed one of the new micro-clovers into the lawn. Micro-clovers are white clover selection with a lower growth habit and smaller leaves so they blend even better with grass. To uniformly establish micro-clover in a lawn, first mow low, power rake and then core aerate before seeding.

The dormant season is a good time to check woody plants for scale insects. Without leaves on plants, hard to notice scales are easier to see on stems. Scale insects are easily overlooked because they are small and immobile most of their lives; and they do not resemble a typical insect. Many of them resemble small oval or circular shells that are white, tan or brown. To the inexperienced eye, scales just appear to be a normal part of the bark. Some plants to inspect for scale insects are dogwood, lilac, Euonymus, maple, apple and pear. If scales are found, severely infested branches can be pruned and destroyed or a dormant oil can be applied in March when temperatures are above 40 degrees. Continue to monitor infested plants as scale populations can increase dramatically during the growing season. If not controlled, heavy infestations can kill branches and possibly entire plants. (Source. Ward Upham, KSU)

Apples are the most common fruit trees grown in home landscapes. If you're planning to plant an apple tree, it's best to plant two trees and be sure to select two different apple cultivars for pollination and good yields. Without adequate pollination, trees may blossom abundantly but bear little fruit. Some fruit trees will pollinate themselves, while others are self-unfruitful; meaning they do not pollinate themselves very well. Self-unfruitful trees include apple, pear, sweet cherry and plums. For good pollination leading to good yields from these trees, two different cultivars are needed. The two cultivars should be planted within 100 feet of one another to make insect pollination easier. Nebraska Extension has a publication listing good fruit trees cultivars for Nebraska and which ones will cross-pollinate. For a copy, call your local Extension office or go to extensionpubs.unl.edu and search for fruit trees.

Here's the link for the fruit tree NebGuide to use if you post these PSAs to social media:

<https://extensionpubs.unl.edu/publication/9000018047625/fruit-tree-cultivars-for-nebraska-g1005/>