

Onions

Thursday, July 17, 2008

The onion makes the meal. It's one of the oldest domesticated plants, and the many different varieties of alliums are all easy to grow. Garlic, the strongest member of the onion family, can be seen hanging around the drying shed, while the storage onions cover the floor.

Is an onion a root? Although they grow underground, like carrots and beets, the actual root is below the part we eat. An onion is all leaf. Each leaf becomes a layer of the bulb, reaching and wrapping all the way down to the roots. Like Swiss chard and other leaf crops, onions are heavy feeders and frost hardy. Soil preparation begins in the fall.

Two tons of biodynamic compost were spread on one tenth of an acre of a clover cover crop last October, and they slowly plowed in. Gentle plowing retains soil structure; I plow like I'm turning over a sleeping baby. The ridges are left over the winter to freeze and thaw, which helps pulverize the clods. Two hundred pounds of lime were sprinkled on top, and another ton of compost was spread before the rebreaker and harrow finished preparing the ground in mid-March.

You can either plant sets or seedling; we grow both. Sets are small bulbs grown the year before, usually less than an inch in diameter. We toss them by the handful into a two inch deep furrow and cover them up. If you don't want crooked ones you can plant each one upright, an inch or two apart. The soil is kept loose with cultivation, hoes, and finger work. Weeds are not allowed.

In two months, we are harvesting green onions, but we leave one every four or five inches to mature into a bulb. Yellow Ebenezer is the yellow variety, and White Bermuda the white one. Onions from sets are the easiest to grow, but are not as high quality and storable as those grown from seed.

The small black seeds are sown in a cold frame in late September, and slowly the slender seedlings sprout and grow. If we had a greenhouse, we could start them in January. But they overwinter fine and are ready by mid-March.

You can buy "bunches" of onion plants, a bunch being about 60 to 75 plants. They are set out five inches apart and the soil is kept loose. We cultivate before we see any weeds. A stitch in time saves nine: one hour stirring bare soil turns into nine hours after the weeds appear and gain a foothold.

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By the end of their third month, the tops of all the onions start dying. I aid this process by bending them over with my feet. A week later they are pulled and left to dry in the field for a day or two, and then gently gathered up and further cured on the floor of an open-air shed. After thoroughly drying – the skins will rattle – onions can be stored in net sacks or tied up in bunches or braids.

Onion varieties are grouped according to day length. The northern ones – long day varieties – need more daylight hours than we get in the south. Although it doesn't keep well, Yellow Granex is a popular Vidalia onion in the south. For storing, Copra can't be beat. It's the one we grow and is day-neutral, it can grow anywhere.

Old farmsteads often have walking onions, a top-setting perennial. These and other multiplying onions have been grown beside the kitchens of the world since time immemorial, supplying green leaves and bulbs whenever needed. The bulblets form on top, fall over and then sprout new plants, thus they "walk" around the perennial bed. A small bulb yields a bigger bulb, and you plant a big bulb to get many small bulbs.

The world is an onion, and tears form as we peel back layer upon layer of illusion. Everything from the root up of an onion is edible, health-giving, and delicious. From their hollow leaves that look like stalks, to their underground root-like bulbs, onions are simply all leaf and a gardener's delight.