

Growing Onions, Garlic, etc. Around Alice Springs

Horticulture Division, Alice Springs

The common brown or white onion is one of the cheaper vegetables and therefore is not so attractive to the home gardener. However, it is very productive and relatively easy to grow. Garlic, leeks, shallots and chives are probably of more interest.

VARIETIES

Suggested onion varieties for the Alice Springs district are Gladalan White, South Australian White Globe, White Spanish, Early Lockyer White, Early Lockyer Brown, Brown Gladalan, Creamgold and Brown Spanish.

PLANTING SEASON

Onions can be planted from March to August, although White Imperial Spanish and Brown Spanish are better suited to the later sowing time.

Chives can be sown from seed during the cooler weather, or by division of clumps in early Spring. Leeks are planted at the same time as onions. Shallots and tree onions should be planted from divisions of the bulk in Autumn. Tree onions develop a cluster of small bulbs at the top of foliage growth. These are used the same as the underground bulbs. Garlic cloves can be planted in Autumn and Winter.



SOIL PREPARATION

Dig the soil as deeply as possible and mix in any available compost or animal manure. The bed should be raked level and firmed ready for planting.

FERTILISER

Low soil phosphorus levels in most Alice Springs home gardens necessitates a high phosphorus input. A mixture of 100 grams of Complete D[®] with 150 grams of superphosphate per square metre of garden area would be a suitable basal application. This can be followed up by 10 grams of urea or 25 grams of sulphate of ammonia per square metre as a side dressing at initial bulbing.

PLANTING

Onions can be direct seeded in rows 30 cm apart and plants thinned to 10 or 12 cm apart, or they can be sown in seed-beds and transplanted when about 7 cm high. Rots and tops are often trimmed at transplanting. Seed drills can be made in a V shape by using the corner of a plank in a sawing action on the surface of the levelled seed-bed.

Seed should be sown 1 to 2 cm deep and lightly covered with firmed down soil. A mixture of sand and sawdust can be used to cover the seed if the soil is liable to crust. Mulching between rows and covering the sown drills with strips of carpet underfelt or narrow boards will assist in keeping the seed-bed moist.

Garlic cloves should be planted 15 cm apart, 5 cm deep, with 40 cm between rows.

WATERING

The area to be sown should be well watered with 50 mm (50 L/m²) before sowing. Watering the sown drills by watering-can once a day after sowing may be necessary in March or April. After emergence the interval between watering can be increased to two and three days, progressing to once a week for well grown onions in Winter. Daily watering with drip irrigation is ideal and can save water if it is managed correctly.

The amount of water required will vary from about 6 mm (6L/m²) every two days in young crops during Winter to 60 mm (50 L/m²) every 5 days in well developed crops in the Summer months. Onions have a low salt tolerance, thus water should preferably be below 500 mg/L T.D.S.

MANAGEMENT

Weeds should be controlled from the beginning. Mulching between rows is also recommended.

HARVESTING

The growth to maturity of onions can take from 5 to 9 months depending on variety and time of sowing. They are mature when the leaves have dried off, but they can be harvested whenever they are big enough. Once the tops have dried off they can be lifted and stored in a cool well ventilated place. About 3 cm of stalk is generally left on the bulbs. Small bulbs can be used for pickling. Alternatively a patch can be sown with a higher plant density to produce small bulbs suitable for pickling.

Leeks can be harvested as required and may be kept growing for 7 to 8 months. Plants can be picked when small for salads or left until they are up to 8 cm in diameter and used for cooking.

The tops of chives are harvested as required. Clumps are dug every 2 or 3 years and thinned out or transplanted. The bulbs of thinnings can be used for salads or soups. Chives are perennial.

Tops and bulbs of shallots can be used from Spring onwards.

Garlic bulbs are harvested after the tops yellow. The bulbs should then be dried (away from direct sunlight) and stored in a cool well ventilated place.

PESTS AND DISEASES

These are few problems from pests and diseases in Alice Springs. Malathion[®] or Pyrethrum[®] can be used if aphids or thrips become troublesome.

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