



Milaeger's

The Lowly Onion--- The Cook's Greatest Ally!

Kevin Milaeger

"It is hard to imagine a civilization without onions."---Julia Child

The ancestors of our large modern onions were collected and cultivated by primitive peoples in central Asia over 5,000 years ago. They were in general use in Egypt not many years later, where they were even used as a sort of currency---some Egyptian pyramid workers were actually paid in onions. Throughout the world, there are many other wild species of onions. For poor folk everywhere, wild onions were free for the taking, and with their ease of cultivation and superb storage capabilities, onions soon became a food staple the world over. They gradually evolved into an essential element in cooking, and remain so today. Cooking the onions reduces their naturally tangy, pungent flavor, allowing the more subtle flavors to emerge. Just recently, on a whim, I decided to add some roasted onions to a simmering kettle of borscht. It made a distinctive difference, and it was delicious, if I do say so myself.



Roasted Onions

Onion planting time is approaching---they are one of the more cold tolerant vegetables. Around here, the earliest planting date for onion sets and plants is about April 1---four weeks before our average last frost date of April 27. Earliest planting date for onion seedlings is a bit later, about the third week of April. At Milaeger's we have all three types. Onion sets look

like miniature onions, averaging about an inch across. They are or staggered rows. Plant them a few inches apart, about an inch deep, so



Onion Plants & Sets

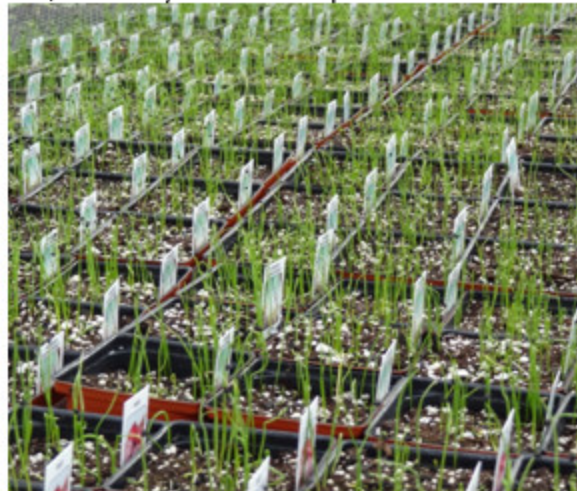
they are just barely poking out. Rather than digging individual small holes, many folks dig a shallow furrow and then just place the sets (right side up, of course) in the furrow.

Onion plants look different, but they are planted in a similar way to sets. They are sold in bunches of 25 or 50, and they look like small scallions. They are about 5" tall, and perhaps a

quarter inch across. Plant the plants about an inch deep. Both sets and plants will produce large onions, but if you like, either can be pulled early for use like scallions, though technically, a true scallion (also known as a green, table, or bunching onion) is a separate type of non-bulbing onion. (We'll have those, too, as seedlings.) If you intend to pull the onions early and use them as you would scallions, plant them about 3" deep instead of 1".

The third type is seedlings, a younger version of the plants. When we sell them, they look almost like chives, but they are a clump of onion

seedlings. To plant them, remove them from the pot and water them thoroughly, so the soil is like mud. Having made a shallow furrow in the soil, you can set the base (the white part) of each onion into the furrow. After you plant a row of them, fold the soil back over the onions, leaving the green, grassy part sticking out of the ground. If you are going to pull some like you would scallions, you can space them 2" apart or so. If you are going to let them all get large, space



Onion Seedlings - Ten Days Old

them accordingly. You will have large onions in autumn. Onions grown from sets or plants start reaching maturity earlier, in mid-summer.

What about seed?, you ask. The main reason to grow from seed is that there are more varieties available. But many onions take a long time to mature, so growing large onions from seed may not be an option. Better to start with plants or sets, but if you want to try seed, sow it when the soil temperature reaches 50 degrees.

Onions are easy to grow if you follow some simple directions. They need full sun and a well-drained soil---notice I said "need," not "prefer." Like many plants that form bulbs, onions can rot if the soil retains too much



White Spear Scallions

water. If your soil retains water, it usually means there is too much clay, or that something is preventing the water from percolating down. Adding sand can help with the drainage. If you think your soil is lacking in richness, add some manure or compost---onions grow best in a rich soil. Onions are light feeders, so you don't need to add much fertilizer---especially avoid any fertilizer that is high in nitrogen. Onions dislike competition, so keep the garden free of weeds. But remember that onions are shallow rooted plants, so when weeding or hoeing take care not to disturb them. For watering,

about an inch of water per week is the standard, most important in the first half of the season.

We will be growing onions of all these types in our little test garden at our Douglas Avenue location. As the season progresses, we'll take photos and share them with you. Also, we are planning on inviting you to the garden, so we can have a casual discussion about the plants you'll see



growing there. The date for the garden visit has not yet been set.



Egyptian Walking Onions

My personal garden

wouldn't be complete without the perennial Egyptian Walking Onion (one of many colloquial names), so named for its habit of traveling around the



garden. At the tops of its thick stems, small bulbils (think miniature onions) appear. When these become weighty, the stems fall over, the bulbils root in the ground, starting the process over again. In this way, they "walk" around the garden. Although edible, these are mainly grown as a novelty plant----I think of them as "funions."

Please feel free to [email](#) me with any questions or comments.

Egyptian Walking Onion