

# Growing Onions in San Antonio

By Karen Gardner, Bexar County Master Gardener

Onions are among the easiest vegetables to grow in San Antonio. You plant onion transplants during December and January. If starting from seed, plant the seed in mid-October.



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The 1015 onions are called that because the seeds are planted around October 15<sup>th</sup>. Onions grow during the cool season, so you don't have to get out in the heat to plant or weed them.

The first step to growing onions is to find a place for them. They need lots of sun and soil that drains well. The soil also needs to be loose and fertile. Mix compost and fertilizer into the soil prior to planting. The amount of fertilizer varies greatly from brand to brand, and there is an ongoing debate over whether to use organic or chemical. Whatever you choose, read the instructions for how much to use. Prepare your planting bed before buying plants, so that they don't sit around languishing while you try to find a place to plant them. (I say this because I have a bad habit of buying plants before I have a place to plant them-wasted plants, wasted money.)

Buy onion transplants at the local nursery. These look like little onion plants that have had the tops cut short. Onions are classified according to the amount of sunlight they will receive. Because we grow onions during the winter here and the days are shorter, make sure that you are buying "short-day" types. "Long-day" and "intermediate-day" types will not bulb up as well. One day in March, I was at one of the big box stores and they were selling "long-day" onion sets, so don't assume that because the store is selling something, it will be right for our area. The short-day types that are typically sold locally are 1015Y Texas Super Sweet, Hybrid Southern Belle Red, Red Creole, Texas Early White, Texas Legend, White Bermuda and Yellow Granex. I have seen these at Rainbow Gardens, Fanick's, Arbolito's, and The Garden Center.

Once you get them home, it's time to plant. It is best if the soil is just barely damp. If there has not been any rain for a long time, water the soil a couple of days before planting. In raised beds, plant the onion sets about six inches apart and to a depth of about ½ inch. Don't plant them too deeply. If you plant too deeply, it will inhibit bulb development and your onions won't be very large. The bulb should sit mostly above-ground as it grows. If you end up with more onion sets than you have room for, you can share with a friend or plant them closer together. If you plant them close together, you can thin them and use them as green onions, making room for the others to form bulbs.



Photo Credit: publicdomainpictures.net

There are a couple of ways to plant them. If you are planting just a few, get a stick, poke a hole in the soil, and put the onion in so that the part that will become the bulb is about ½ inch deep. There will most likely be some little roots hanging down-you want those to go down into the hole and start anchoring the plant. Don't just poke the onion into the ground without making a hole-it tends to damage those little roots. If you are planting a lot of onions, make a

shallow trench with a hoe and set the plants about 6 inches apart along the edge. Then bring the onions upright as you fill in the trench. After planting, water very gently. Sometimes the soil will settle when you water and the plants will not be deep enough, so check plant depth after you water, making any necessary adjustments. Now, let them grow.

Keep them uniformly moist throughout the growing season-deep watering every few days is better than shallow watering every day. **Drip irrigation is the best.** An easier, relatively inexpensive alternative to a drip irrigation system is a soaker hose. The kind that is flat lasts longer than the round, black ones that look like they are made from ground up old tires. You could put the hose down before planting and use it as a guide to make nice, even rows. Fertilize about every three weeks. Onions don't have many pest or disease problems. The main cause of problems is keeping them wet for too long. Letting them become water-logged invites fungal and bacterial diseases. Weed regularly-if you let the weeds get big, you are likely to pull up the onion along with the weed. Luckily, because onions are spaced close together, weeds are not a big problem.

The onions will be ready to harvest mid-May through June. Make sure that you plant them in an area that you won't need to use until onion harvest time. If you want to use that planting area before they are mature, you can pull up the onions early and use as green onions or small bulbs. Onions will let you know that they are ready to harvest when their tops fall over. Once that happens, there will be very little increase in bulb size. Also, once the onions bolt (put up a flower stem), there will be very little bulb growth. Just pull them up and use them. I have pinched off the flower stem and they have grown a little bit more, but they haven't stored as well.

When ready to harvest, discontinue watering for a couple of days and then pull them up. Set them in a well-ventilated area out of the sun to dry for a few days before storing them. If left in the sun, they can develop sunscald and will not store as long. Once the tops dry and turn brown, you can cut them off, being careful not to trim too close to the bulb. They can then be stored in mesh bags or boxes in a cool, dark place. I have stored mine in shallow boxes in the corner of one of our bedrooms. I've had onions from June until February storing them in this manner. The sweet yellow onions do not store as long as the white and red onions, so use them first. Also, as a general rule, the larger onions don't store as long as the smaller ones.



A few of my onions



Photo credit: Karen Gardner

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Here is a link to Dixondale Farms-they've been growing onions in South Texas for 100+ years:

[http://www.dixondalefarms.com/online\\_guides](http://www.dixondalefarms.com/online_guides)

Here's an article by Calvin Finch, Ph.D:

[http://www.mysanantonio.com/life/home\\_and\\_garden/article/Growing-onions-in-San-Antonio-4040302.php](http://www.mysanantonio.com/life/home_and_garden/article/Growing-onions-in-San-Antonio-4040302.php)