

Prize-Winning Onions Seed Collection: **Cultivation Notes**



Onions are a supremely versatile vegetable in both the garden and the kitchen and are one of the most valuable crops we can grow. With careful planning and by sowing the right varieties at the right time we can have fresh onions of one type or another every day of the year. In this collection we've put together three of our favourite heirloom varieties, carefully chosen because we've found them to taste delicious and perform well, in the garden, the kitchen and on the show bench at our local horticultural show!

These cultivation notes have been put together based on the course material for our spring Grow Your Own course and we hope we will see some of you there. If you're not joining us, these cultivation notes give you all the information you need to grow along at home though, and you can also grow along with us online by following us on Facebook or Instagram, where we'd love to see how you get on too.

Course Topic: Plant Spacing

Onions are also perfect for demonstrating a key idea that we discuss on the course: plant spacing. By varying planting distance we can often influence the size and harvest date of vegetables and make the best use of our available space. With cauliflowers for example, we often closely space some so that they produce small heads which are ready to harvest sooner than those that are planted further apart, which grow more slowly but produce larger curds. This can be put to excellent use with onions, where we use the following spacings:

1. Single plants spaced 20cm apart to produce large bulbs of 500g or more (depending on variety)
2. Multisowing 4 seeds per module and planting them out as groups spaced 30cm apart will still produce decent sized bulbs of around 400g, and you can fit more of them into the same bed space.
3. Above 4 seeds per module and bulb size starts to reduce; we like to take advantage of this effect by sowing 10 seeds per module and growing them as clumps spaced 20cm apart either as spring onions or as small bulb onions for pickling, depending on the variety.

A Note on Compost

Our sowing instructions call for a 'good quality peat-free compost', but what exactly does that mean? We look at soil and compost in depth on our courses but the key points are that a seed sowing compost should have a fine crumb structure that ensures good contact with the seeds and holds enough moisture to keep seeds and seedlings moist, while excess water is able to drain away after watering. If you are fortunate enough to have a suitably weed-free homemade compost, leaf mould or loam available then this can be used to make an excellent sowing mix that fits this description. When buying and using bagged compost, because the materials that go into peat-free compost are so variable, we find the best results are achieved by blending different types together. Our standard mix is 2 parts of a fibrous multipurpose compost such as New Horizon, 2 parts of a more granular, wood-based multipurpose such as SylvaGrow and 1 part of a loam-based seed sowing compost. We also recommend sieving your compost, which helps to blend them, break up lumps and create a nice open crumb structure, as well as remove any large pieces of wood or stones.

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Onion - Ailsa Craig

Ailsa Craig is a reliable old favourite introduced as far back as 1887 and remains a standard on allotments and show benches to this day, prized for its large bulbs that have a straw coloured skin and a mild flavour.

1. From early January to late February fill seed trays or 2.5cm cell module trays with a good quality peat-free compost (see notes for tips)
2. Sow seed thinly in seed trays or multisow up to 6 seeds per module. Cover lightly with more compost, firm down and water. While onion seed will germinate at low temperatures, the earliest sowings benefit from the heat of a propagator or heat mat to speed up the process, which should take approximately 7 to 14 days if kept between 10 and 16C
3. Keep the trays moist but not wet and as soon as the seeds have germinated remove from heat. Grow on in an unheated greenhouse, polytunnel or coldframe
4. Seedlings grown in trays should be pricked out into modules (either singly or up to 4 per cell) once at crook stage (when the shoot is about 1.5cm tall and has formed a loop but hasn't fully extended)
5. From mid-March, harden off before planting out into well prepared beds from early April. Onion beds should be fertile but not freshly manured. Space plants 20cm apart each way for single plants or 30cm apart each way for multisown modules
6. Keep the young plants sheltered from strong winds and well-watered while they establish themselves. Onions don't compete with well with weeds so keep the bed weeded and mulched. Mulching will also help maintain soil fertility - onions benefit from a good supply of nitrogen so occasional applications of chicken manure pellets are beneficial, as is a liquid seaweed feed
7. When the leaves start to die down in late June/early July stop watering
8. Lift, dry, store and enjoy, or show them off at your nearest horticultural show!

Spring Onion - North Holland Blood Red

North Holland Blood Red is a dual use onion with a vibrant red colour that can be used for both spring onions or medium sized bulb onions. For bulbs, follow the instructions for Ailsa Craig above or for spring onions sow monthly as follows:

1. From early January to September fill 2.5cm cell module trays with a good quality peat-free compost (see notes for tips)
2. Multisow 6 to 10 seeds per module. Cover lightly with more compost, firm down and water. While onion seed will germinate at low temperatures, sowings at this time of year benefit from gentle heat to speed up the process, which should take approximately 7 to 14 days if kept between 10 and 16C
3. Keep the trays moist but not wet and as soon as the seeds have germinated remove from heat. Grow on in an unheated greenhouse, polytunnel or coldframe
4. When the roots have fully developed but not yet become congested, transplant each module as a clump of plants into a well prepared bed, spacing them 15 to 20cm apart each way. To assess whether the plants are ready for transplanting pop a couple of modules out and have a look, at the correct stage there will be healthy, bright white roots visible on all sides of the module and they won't have started to brown or circle round themselves
5. Once the plants have reached the desired size harvest them either single or by pulling the whole bunch

Shallot - Cuisse de Poulet du Poitou

Introduced prior to 1944, this is a banana-type shallot that also goes by the name of Zebrune. Once you've grown this it will be the only shallot you'll ever want to grow again! The large, pink-tinged bulbs are of the finest flavour we have found.

1. From late January to early February fill 2.5cm cell module trays with a good quality peat-free compost (see notes for tips)
2. Multisow 4 to 6 seeds per module. Cover lightly with more compost, firm down and water. While shallot seed will germinate at low temperatures, sowings at this time of year benefit from gentle heat to speed up the process, which should take approximately 7 to 14 days if kept between 10 and 16C
3. Keep the trays moist but not wet and as soon as the seeds have germinated remove from heat. Grow on in an unheated greenhouse, polytunnel or coldframe
4. From mid-March, harden off before planting out into a well prepared bed from early April. The bed should be fertile but not freshly manured. Space the multisown modules 30cm apart each way, planting each module whole and not breaking them apart.
5. Keep the young plants sheltered from strong winds and well watered while they establish themselves. Shallots don't compete with well with weeds so keep the bed weeded and mulched. Mulching will also help maintain soil fertility - shallots benefit from a good supply of nitrogen so occasional applications of chicken manure pellets are beneficial, as is a liquid seaweed feed
6. When the leaves start to die down in late June/early July stop watering
7. Lift, dry, store and enjoy the best shallots you are ever likely to eat!