



# Growing Great Onions

—Elsie Kline

Around the middle of January I am actually ready to digest the seed catalogs—enjoying the entire pile that arrives in our mailbox. New varieties, and reappearance of old ones, it's all the perfect pastime on a cold, wintry day. One thing I always make sure I have by this time of year is onion seed. I can get it locally, so it is not a matter of allowing several weeks for delivery. There is plenty of time to order most other seeds, giving me more “digesting” time.

Onions started from seed need to be started in late January or that is what works for me. While the snow is coming down and the thermometer might read 12-15 degrees, it's almost therapeutic to get out some seed packets.

We love onions. David thinks freshly baked bread, buttered and spread with a bit of mayonnaise, topped with one-fourth-inch-thick lightly salted onion slices is a special treat any time of the year. Onions are a necessity to have on hand and do not need to be canned or frozen. They are considered the number one vegetable enjoyed in the United States. When I read that I thought it sounded a bit far-fetched, but then I thought about it. On sandwiches, in soups and salads, on pizza, with meats, they add flavor and zest to so many dishes. I probably use some onion on half the days in a year. So, yes, they might be right. (Don't forget onion rings. Make your own; they are delicious!)

For years I bought onion sets and several times onion plants, then ten years ago I decided to try seeds. Candy was the variety I chose, and for a nice, large, mild onion, it is still my favorite. I generally grow red onions, too, but sometimes use sets for those. For me, onions grown from seed grow larger and keep better over winter. I used the last of last year's crop in late May. By then some had sprouted but those yellow sprouts were good to use in cooking and salads. Also, by this time there were edible-sized green onions in the garden.

I'm sure there are commercial onion growers out there who know much more about raising onions than I do. But here in steps is what works for me.

## *Step 1 –*

Although I have used cottage cheese cartons, what I prefer are planting trays with multiple compartments per tray. Fill the tray with planting medium (I like to moisten the soil first), use the eraser of a pencil to punch a hole  $\frac{1}{4}$ " deep in each little compartment. Drop one or two seeds in each one. Using two fingers cover seeds. I then soak the trays in slightly warm water in the bathtub. When thoroughly soaked, cover with plastic wrap and put in warm spot. I put mine on the woodbox behind the woodstove.

## *Step 2 –*

Your seedlings will sprout in 3-5 days. Remove plastic

wrap and at once put them in a sunny window. Keep moist.

**Step 3 –**

When plants are four or more inches tall, use a scissors and cut the tops, leaving the plants three inches tall. Repeat this as needed until planting time. I tend to put them in a cooler spot (not in the same room as the woodstove) as the plants will be stronger.



*Plug tray*

**Step 4 –**

From late April to mid-May in our area, onion plants can be transplanted into the garden. To transplant your seedlings, make a furrow one inch deep, put water in furrow, then plant individual onion plants five to six inches apart in the row.

As your plants grow, keep weed-free and water if you have a dry spell. Here in Ohio I very seldom have to water. When the onion bulbs are the size of golf balls, make sure they are not hilled, but have three-fourth of the bulb exposed. You get bigger, rounder onions that way.



*Let onions dry for a week*

My mother-in-law always said do not let the August rains fall on your onions. So usually about the last day in July I pull out the entire onion plants and lay them on a table in the farm shop. Around a week later the tops have dried



*Braid using the three-strand method*

enough that they are ready for braiding. Braiding right when they come in from the garden doesn't work, as the tops dry and the braid is no longer tight enough to stay together. If you wait too long to braid them, the tops will be brittle and break.

I make a three-strand braid with a loop of baler twine taken from a small square bale as one of the strands. Every time you fold one strand you



*Keep bulbs exposed*

add an onion. When your braid is long enough, loop the twine over the entire braid pulling it tightly. This is your loop to hang on a nail.

These braids of onions are then hung along the back of our cabin porch. Here they are out of the sun or rain and there is good ventilation. They are left hanging there until the weather gets down to freezing, then are

moved and hung on nails inside the farm shop. When winter's grip really sets in and the onions are in danger of freezing, I take them into the house and hang them alongside the cellar steps where it is cool and dark. Many people's basements would work fine if they are not too warm.

So...after some trial and error, this is the method of raising onions that works for me. No doubt, there are readers who have other ways of doing it that are satisfactory. I find it enjoyable and rewarding, and David has his onions all the year long.

*Elsie Kline lives on a farm near Mt. Hope, Ohio, and besides growing onions and many other vegetables, enjoys her grandchildren.*



*A tasty wintertime meal - winter radishes, cheese, and onions on a warm slice of bread.*