

BELL COUNTY MASTER GARDENER

Tip of the Week

By Beverly Wickersham

Planting Onions

One of the most popular garden plants for central Texas is the onion as many of us eat them in our everyday meals that we prepare, the prepared meals we purchase in grocery stores and the meals we eat in restaurants. By growing your own onions, you will ensure that your family has a fresh supply of onions for at least six months.

The gardener will be concerned about the variety onion to be selected, the preparation of the soil, fertilization, time of the year to plant, planting techniques, moisture required, insect and disease control, and harvesting and storage.

The selection of the correct variety is largely determined by the region of the United States in which you reside. Central Texas needs a “short-day” variety such as one of the *Bermudas* such as the Grano 502, the Granex or the Y1015. The Y1015 has proven to be an outstanding selection for our area as it is very sweet, can produce softball-sized bulbs, and has a reasonably long storage life.

Onions grow best on soil that has been prepared properly. Our heavy, clay soil will need to have 2-3 inches of well-decomposed organic materials turned into the soil. The garden location should have been prepared in advance of the first freeze by tilling the planting bed. This will permit the roots of the existing weeds and plants left over from the previous year to be exposed to the freezing temperatures and die. If this step is not accomplished, you may have more weeds to deal with when the weather warms up and the onions began to grow and bulb out. Before planting, your future onion growth can be helped by adding a fertilizer rich in phosphorous such as a 10-20-10 mix. The fertilizer should be raked in the area to be planted. If the soil is very dry, it is advisable to water the area several days before planting.

For the areas that have the first 3 digits of a zip code from 750-769, the onion planting experts have recommend a planting time during the week of January the 14th. Onions can be planted later, but it likely that the end product will not be as large as they would have been if planted early.

Plants should be set approximately 1” deep with a 6” spacing. If you plan to harvest some onions early to use as green onions, you could plant the onions a little closer and then pull out every other one to allow the onion plants enough space to properly bulb.

After the onions are planted, you need to begin a regular watering regimen, being very careful not let the plants completely dry out. Depending on what Mother Nature provides from above, you may need to water the growing onion plants on a weekly basis with enough water to dampen the soil at least six inches. After the neck of the onion plant begins to soften, you need to let the soil dry as excessive moisture will cause onions to decay.

As insects are a problem on most vegetables we plant, onions are no exception. The Thrips are the most common enemy of the onion as they feed on the leaves, causing the tips of the leaves to turn brown. Diazinon or Malathion will control the thrips if applied early.

Onions are considered to be fully mature after their tops have fallen. After pulling from the soil, the onion tops should be allowed to turn brown and dry and then the tops should be cut off leaving a 1" stub at the top of the bulb. Onions last longer when stored in a mesh bag or a nylon stocking. The onions should be placed in a cool dry area that has adequate ventilation.

