

Bell County Master Gardener
Tip of the week
By David Fitch
The Onion

Ah, the onion. Who amongst us has not shed a tear for this prodigious bulb? Well maybe that is a slight exaggeration, at least for me. I've not yet mastered the art of growing giant onions. Many years ago I visited a garden owned and maintained by a frail little lady in her mid to late 80s. She grew onions the size of softballs!

The garden onion, *Allium cepa*, is part of a well-known family. Its cousins are chives, leeks, shallots, scallions and garlic. In fact, the word Allium is Latin for garlic. Like so many of the vegetables we enjoy from the garden, the onion dates back to the earliest recorded time, around 5,000 BC. Although they were most likely not cultivated then, there are traces of their use. Today the culinary value of the onion is known around the globe. Almost every society or culture consumes onions in one form or another. Additionally, onions are used medicinally and have been for thousands of years. Roman gladiators are said to have used onion as a rub to prepare their muscles for battle.

In addition to being one of the most popular vegetables in modern gardens, they are one of the easiest to propagate, grow and harvest. You can start onions from seeds in the fall or plant sets in January. Either way they should have time to mature before the summer heat sets in. Plant the sets in shallow rows about 1 inch deep. For a little extra assurance of hitting that maturity date, you may want to use a short-day variety. I prefer the short-day variety because they tend to be the sweeter onions like the Texas Super Sweet or 1015. Onions like a moist soil rich in nitrogen. Try adding a cup of high nitrogen fertilizer per 12th food row when the sets appear to begin growing. You will know when the plants are mature and have stopped growing; the tops fall over!

I use onions in almost every entre that I prepare. I roast them, fry them, sauté them, and even use them raw. They are even good immature as you cull them from the garden as green onions. The entire plant is edible. My favorite onion dish though is one that my mother used to make frequently when I was growing up, creamed onions. It is very simple. Using pearl onions or peeled and chopped onions, cook in boiling water until tender. Drain and set aside onions, reserving some liquid. In a saucepan melt ½ stick butter. Stir in flour to make a roux. Add two cups milk being careful not to boil the milk. Add onions. Add salt and black pepper to taste. Heat and serve

The onion is a must have for every garden. There are hundreds of varieties and their uses are endless. I've never met an onion I didn't like. They are easy to grow too. Have any questions about gardening in Central Texas? Contact ask.bcmga@gmail.com