Onions & Leeks

Onions and leeks are very easy to grow if you follow basic steps.

This information is specific to north Central Texas and will help ensure success.

Start with a raised, or in-ground garden space that gets **full sun** and has rich, loose soil that if full of organic matter and has been maintained organically (preferably). For your greatest chance of success, **onion sets, or slips and leeks should be planted in January.**

Planting - Unable to plant the leeks or onion slips right away? Remove them from the bag and spread them out in a cool, dry area. The roots and tops may begin to dry out but do not be alarmed, the onion is a member of the lily family and as such will live for approximately three weeks off the bulb. The first thing that the onion and leeks will do after planting will be to shoot new roots.

Dig a trench 4" deep, place fertilizer, such as NHG's Bulb Food (6-8-4) or the NHG Herb and Veggie Food (4-6-5) in the trench, and then add 3" of soil on top of the fertilizer. Plant the onion sets approximately one inch deep with four inch spacing. If you plan to harvest some early as "spring" or "green" onions, plant the slips as close as two inches apart and harvest every other one early, prior to them beginning to bulb. This leaves room for the remaining ones to get full size.

As the onion begins to form, the soil around it should be loose, allowing the bulb to expand. Don't place any additional soil on top, as this will not allow the bulb to form. Remember that the size of the onion bulb is dependent upon the number and size of the green leaves or tops at the time of bulb maturity. For each leaf there will be a ring of onion; the larger the leaf, the larger the ring will be. The onion will first form a top and then, depending on the onion variety and length of daylight, start to form the bulb.

Leeks - The leek is a member of the onion family, but is milder than either onions or garlic. Unlike onions or garlic, leeks do not form bulbs or produce cloves but develop an edible 6 to 10 inch long round stem as much as 2 inches in diameter.

Ideally, the shaft of the leek remains white and tender. The way to achieve this is to plant them deeply, about 4", so that only a couple of inches of the leaf is visible. Through the growing process, mound up soil around the shaft so that sunlight does not get to it to create photosynthesis, or turn it green, which makes it tough. When the shaft is about 1"-2" in diameter, approximately around the same time as you are harvesting onions, use a garden fork to carefully harvest.

Fertilization - About 3 weeks after planting, begin fertilizing with a balanced, organic fertilizer such as NHG Herb and Veggie Food (4-6-5) or liquid Hasta-Gro. Repeat fertilization every 2-3 weeks. Fertilize the leeks when you fertilize your onions.

Because Texas weather can be unpredictable, swings in temperature may cause your onion to begin its second season and produce a flower. You can't stop this, but it does cause a bit of a problem with the shelf life of the onion. The flower stalk that has formed inside the onion will begin to rot after it is harvested. Be sure you use these onions first.

Harvest – When the stalks fall over, **generally when the temperatures rise in May, it's time to harvest.** Pull, or gently dig up the onion and lightly brush off excess soil. Lay them out in the shade, not touching each other, for a week to dry. Clip off the roots, and cut the stalk off to about an inch from the bulb. Store them in a net or basket in a cool dry place. If you use a net, tie a knot in between each onion so they don't rest on each other and you can clip the bottom onion off when you're ready to use it.

Cure & Store Your Onions

Before you store your onions, you must cure them.

- Harvest the bulbs, leaving the green tops. Remove any with bruises or soft spots.
- Lay onions in a single layer in a cool, dry place out of direct sunlight (a pantry or garage works well)
  Good air circulation is key to prevent rotting.
- Allow to dry for 2-3 weeks. The bulb will feel dry and the outer layer will become papery. The top growth will be completely dry.
- Once dry, cut off the excess roots and the onion tops and place in a mesh bag or basket for storage in cool, dry area.