

How to Grow Walla Walla Onions from Seed

Walla Walla onions (*Allium cepa*) are so sweet and juicy that some people bite right into them, eating them like apples, and they are a great treat to grow in your own backyard. Originally from Spain, they were first planted in the U.S. near Walla Walla, Washington in the early 1900s. One of the most popular sweet onions, it is usually ready to harvest 125 days after planting. They can be grown throughout the U.S. with proper care. While most onions are grown strictly for culinary use, the Walla Walla produces a large, rounded cluster of white blooms at the end of a long stem.



Planting: Onion seed should be planted as soon as the soil can be worked, depending on spring weather. For the our area, i.e. the Detroit metro area, mid- to late March is best, but onions can be planted until late April, depending on the variety. Remember that hard freezes can damage young seedlings. Since onion seedlings are fairly cold-tolerant, they survive in the soil in cold weather as long as the ground doesn't freeze. Plant the seed about one inch deep and one and one-half inches apart. When the plants have five to 10 leaves, thin to three inches apart and use the pulled onions as scallions.

Since onion roots are shallow, water them frequently and never allow them to dry during bulbing or the bulbs will be small and leathery. Preventing drought-stress in onions can also help to prevent insect problems. Don't be concerned if bulbs develop mostly out of the soil.

By late August, the tops of onion plants will begin to lay over on the ground. Food made in the leaves will be stored in the onion bulbs. Do not water them at this point. When most of the tops are on the ground, lift the onions to break the bulbs from the roots. Leave the bulbs on the ground exactly as they were growing to cure them for storage and prevent sunburn. Bulbs will be ready for harvest in a week or two. Be sure to bring onions in before snow, rain or freezing temperatures. Cut off the tops when they are thoroughly dry. Store the bulbs in a burlap sack or an open crate in a dark area with temperatures as close to freezing as possible without actually freezing.

Care: Slow, deep watering helps to promote healthy roots. Give the plants about an inch of water per week. You can also add a thin layer of mulch to reduce water evaporation, but keep mulch at least an inch away from stems. You should keep the area weed-free to prevent competition with the onion's shallow roots. Apply a balanced fertilizer, such as 10-10-10, in early summer for better growth. The hollow stems of the plant can be harvested for use as green onions when they are 8 inches high. The entire plant can be harvested at any time, but the bulbs underground will have reached full size when the tops die back. The mature onions sometimes grow as large as 4 inches in diameter. After digging up the onions, let them dry in full sun for about four days. Then move them to screens or racks in a dark, dry location. Walla Walla onions don't keep well; use them within a month.

Additional Tips: The most common problems faced by Walla Walla onions are fungal spots, blights and blotches. They also suffer from root, stem, crown and collar rots. Proper spacing between plants helps prevent fungal infections. Avoid overhead watering, and water in the morning to give the foliage time to dry before nightfall. Use fungicides if cultural controls aren't sufficient. Despite the onion's sweet deliciousness, deer and rabbits usually leave it alone, so pest control should not be a major issue.