

Onions, Ailsa Cragg: Growing and Seed Saving¹

Ailsa Cragg produce large sweet onions, up to 2 pounds which, when properly stored last until February. Though a bit sharp at first, the flavour gets sweeter the longer they are stored; many people enjoy them raw.

Year one, Late Winter: In February, start onion seeds on a nourishing mix (has to have some compost or needs to be fed). Put the seeds on the surface and gently press in, en mass, then add a sprinkling of soil on top. The seeds will sprout in 6 to 10 days in a modestly warm location (approx. 15° C by the fridge or hot water heater) and invariably some will send their roots into the air and be upside down.

Around late April to May, transplant out (6-12 inches apart) when the soil is not so wet as to compact badly and the threat of frost is no longer. You can harden these off for several weeks outside in a protected area near your house. Water regularly as the onions are growing. Depending on the water-holding capacity of your soil, you may have to water every 1-3 days. Ensure the onions do not dry out. Provide a twice-weekly nourishment with the island's favourite organic fertilizer. If water-stressed they are more likely to bolt before they reach maximum size or maturity, though if they bolt, they can be pulled from the ground, their seed stem cut off and allowed to dry, though these make good onions for everyday purposes at a time when the old crop has long been used.

By the end of July or mid-August the tops start to fall over about ¼ of the way above the bulb. When the tops fall over in about 20%, withdraw water. In a summer when there is rain, one pulls them half out of the ground at

this point to start the drying process and, of course if it is going to rain extensively, pull them and put them under cover, out of direct sun.

When 50% of them have fallen over, gently press the rest of the greens over to stop the growing process. Or, you can pull them out on one side by the roots at this point. If you uproot them completely and they lie in the sun they can get sun scalded. When most of them are recumbent, though not completely dry by any means, pick them up and store them in a place sheltered from the rain where they can cure until the tops are pretty much all brown.

Squeeze test all onions, pulling any that are soft, and use those first. A good curing process will ensure decent storage.

Year two, Spring: Your stored onions, will begin to go soft and sprout. Plant the nicest looking onion or two in the ground. For best viability, please plant more than one onion for seed production (up to 6 if you can), bearing in mind, that you will harvest several thousand seeds. You may wish to put a cloche over top of them to protect them somewhat from the elements if you are planting while frost or snow is still a threat.

Year two, Harvesting the Seeds, Summer:

When the seed heads is fully formed, and dry, carefully remove the head of seeds from the plant. Use some newspaper with the seeds between two sheets and gently go over them with a rolling pin on a hard surface. Or, put the seed heads in a zip-lock bag and shake the seeds free. Then, winnow the seeds, blowing off the husks.

¹ Galiano-grown instructions from E. Latta. Edited by C. Doty. SLOG tested. These instructions apply to onions in general.