

Massachusetts Master Gardener Association

FACT SHEET



Have Gardening Questions? The **Master Gardener Help Line Hours** are 10 a.m. – 2 p.m. on Fridays (all year) as well as Wednesdays (March-November) and Mondays (April-October).

Phone: 617-933-4929 Email: mghelpline@masshort.org.

Onions

The genus *Allium* – onions, shallots, leeks, chives, scallions and garlic – are easy to grow, good for you, and add flavor and fragrance to food. Whether wild or domesticated, green or dried, alliums have two defining characteristics: a bulbous body and a sulfurous nature, resulting in a distinctive “onion-y” aroma.

Growing : Onions, leeks and shallots can be grown from seed, sets (a plant with a small bulb) or transplants (young plant with undeveloped bulb). Direct sown alliums need a weed-free bed and good drainage. To check, dig a hole about six inches deep and pour two cups of water in the hole. If the water is still there after five minutes, you need to amend the soil with compost, sand or peat moss. Unless they are attacked by pests (which is rare), the alliums require little care.

Keep the bed free of weeds by cultivating shallowly. Once plants are well along, mulch them with a thin layer of straw or chopped dead leaves. Remove the garlic scapes (curling top of flower stalk) as soon as they are fully formed to encourage further bulb development. Do not break or bend the growing tops of onions because it will arrest bulb development. If the top browns or dies back, this is probably *Alternaria*, a fungal infection. Remove infected plants with care. Alliums that show stunted growth or have pink or purple roots have pink root disease. Look for disease resistant varieties. Persistent damp conditions encourage purple blotch, a fungal infection that produces purple spots on the leaves. Treat these diseases with an organic fungicide.

Harvesting : Onions may have a yellow, white, red or purple skin. Fresh onions, also called sweet, have a milder taste. Dry, storage onions have a stronger flavor. Yellow onions are excellent keepers. Red onions are best eaten quickly. Onions are edible and can be harvested at any stage. They are ready for harvest when most of the tops lose color and flop over. Dig them out gently, brush off any

soil and lay them in the sun for a day or two. Scallions are the immature plants of any bulbing onion, harvested before the bulb is fully formed. Scallions may also be called spring onions, green onions, or salad onions. The green tops and the white root (the developing bulb) of scallions are both eaten. Leeks may look like gigantic scallions, but they are not. They may grow up to two feet tall and two inches thick, but do not form a bulb. Leeks can be left in the ground until you are ready to use them. Dig them out leaving the roots intact, but cutting off the coarse green tops an inch above where the leaves divide. Chives are hardy perennials with wispy blades related to grass and rich in Vitamin C. Clip the blades with scissors to use straight from the garden.

Garlic has the strongest flavor of all the alliums making it a culinary favorite. A hardy perennial, garlic is grown from its individual cloves that each produces one plant with of a single bulb which may contain up to 20 cloves. Choose a sunny site where the soil is not damp; plant individual cloves 4 inches apart. Of the two types of garlic, softneck is more common (the usual grocery store garlic) because it is easier to plant, matures faster than hardneck varieties and keeps longer. It is characterized by its white, paper-thin skin, with no scape, and smaller cloves. Hardneck garlic is hardier than softneck. It has a scape stalk in the center of the plant which coils from the top with fewer but larger cloves and less of an outer bulb wrapper, reducing its shelf life. Harvest garlic when the tops have dried. Remove the tops and store the bulbs in a cool, dry place. Grocery store garlic is often treated and cannot be used for planting. Shallots are not quite an onion and not quite garlic. They grow as bulbs divided into cloves clusters. They have a distinctive tapered shape that sets them apart from other members of the onion family. Their flavor is sometimes described as a blend of sweet onion and garlic. Shallots need to be cured after harvest, but not in the sun. Spread them out indoors to dry.

The Massachusetts Master Gardener Association is a non-profit organization whose mission is to share knowledge and experience with the public through outreach programs in education, horticulture and gardening; to provide the Master Gardener Training Program to interested members of the public; and to provide graduates of the Master Gardener Training Program with educational and practical opportunities to extend their knowledge and interests in gardening and related topics. <http://www.massmastergardeners.org/>