

The information offered here is to help gardeners grow vegetables successfully. It focuses on common questions asked as well as conditions, pests, and diseases that occur in St. Tammany Parish home gardens. Every attempt has been made to ensure the accuracy of the information, but references should always be checked, and LSU AgCenter personnel contacted if there are questions.

Alliums

By Jerry Ballanco



Introduction

THIS GROUP OF WONDERFUL CULINARY gems is friendly to cooks and growers alike. It includes onions, green onions, scallions (our Louisiana green onions), shallots, leeks, and garlic. Garlic chives and regular chives are also in this group, as are the increasingly popular alliums, grown for their spectacular flowers.

In general, alliums are subject to few pests and diseases, are not picky about soil (if it drains well), do not demand a lot of attention, and take up little space in the garden. They can be easily planted in a flower bed or outside of a garden fence as raccoons, possum, rabbits, and deer avoid them.

Green onions, scallions, and chives grow fairly quickly; the other alliums—shallots, leeks, and garlic—take a while to grow. Garlic takes nine to 10 months to grow. Plant when the kids go to school and harvest when they get out for the summer. Bulb onions and leeks take six months from seed or three to four months from starts. (I am not a fan of the bulb "sets" which are sold in mesh bags).

Onions and leeks can be harvested any time after planting depending on intended use.

Alliums are not fussy about soil but there is one significant exception: the soil must drain well. If there is so much rain that the soil cannot dry or the soil just naturally holds moisture, alliums will grow poorly then turn mushy and rot. Rotten anything is nasty but rotten onions are particularly gross to remove from the garden.

For best results, a soil test should guide fertilization schedule. The guidelines given for each crop are generic. Ask your LSU ag center county agent to help you with questions if necessary. For those who use organic fertilizers, this kind of consultation may be very helpful. Thinking about fertilizers makes many gardeners nervous. Try to relax. Alliums are not picky but benefit well from supplemental side dressings of nitrogen during their relatively long growth. See more at <https://www.lsuagcenter.com/~media/system/0/1/f/8/01f81e42f920be38f87b75f9d34f4fc4/pub2318%20allium%20crops%20rev%200417pdf.pdf>

Scallions (aka Louisiana Green Onions)

SCALLIONS, AKA LOUISIANA GREEN ONIONS, must be the easiest crop in the world to grow.

In September, feed stores begin to sell green onion starts. They are usually sold in bunches or individual bulbs for a very reasonable price. Planting 1/2 pound will usually provide enough scallions for a family for the year with enough lefoot over to start the next season.

Prepare the soil by loosening it and adding one-half pound 8-24-24 fertilizer per 25 square foot bed four to six weeks before the anticipated planting date. Side dress with 1/4 pound 8-24-24 (4 TBS) alternating with 1 TBS ammonium nitrate every four weeks. (Most feed stores will sell a 1- or 5-pound bag of ammonium nitrate.)

Break off the individual bulbs and plant in the ground or container. Plant to a depth so that the tip of the bulb is just below the soil surface. Put them 4 inches or so apart.

In a week, the green tops will start to emerge. In three to five weeks, they will be harvestable but significant division and growth will continue if left unmolested.

Within weeks, some of the bulbs will make a cluster of sprouts. That cluster or clump can be harvested, the needed number removed from the clump, and the rest replaced in the same hole, to start the cycle over again.

In May or June, most of the clusters will look brown, droopy leaved, and generally unhappy. Pull and let them dry without washing. Dry is important in storage as they may mildew and rot if not dried properly. Those bulbs will be your starters for the next year to plant in September, or they may be used as shallots and new bulbs purchased in September. After the bulbs are dry, cut off the dry leaves and store the bulbs in a dry area with goal to plant in September. I do not know what those wavy white things in the photo are.



*A scallion cluster, aka green onion bunch.
Photo by Jerry Ballanco.*



*A scallion cluster, aka green onion bunch.
Photo by Jerry Ballanco.*



Louisiana shallots (really scallions), early growth. Photo by Jerry Ballanco.



Mature scallion bed. Each cluster has 4-6 "green onions." Photo by Jerry Ballanco.



Drying scallions. When the bulbs are completely dry and all greenery crispy brown, the bulbs may be removed from the leaves and stored in a cool, dry location. Photo by Jerry Ballanco.

Green onions purchased from a grocery may be a source of more green onions. Cut one inch off the bottom of purchased green onions that have a small root at the base. Plant it in soil, root down, so the top of the cut section is just below the soil surface. Within days the green sprout will appear and, after a month or so, can be cut off at the soil level to use in cooking. These onions will not multiply. This technique is especially useful in the summer when the scallions would rather be resting.



Green onions about 7-14 days old, grown in July from roots of store-purchased green onions. Photo Jerry Ballanco.

Onions



Onions are usually inexpensive and readily available at the grocery store, so many home gardeners save the space for other crops. That's a shame because onions are so easy to grow and, in the garden, are ready at a moment's notice for the kitchen. When harvested from the garden, the entire onion can be used in cooking.

As with other alliums, buying seedlings is far easier than growing from seed and result in a better outcome compared to "sets" purchased in a nylon bag. Select varieties that are "short day." Typical ordering time is October and November for planting in December through February for harvest in April through June.

Because onions are in the ground for a long time before harvest, plant them in soil that drains well. An obnoxious, rainy, overcast winter can bring rot to many vegetables, onions among them.

Onions are pretty heavy feeders (the layers in the onion bulb are modified leaves). Prepare the soil with $\frac{3}{4}$ pound of 8-24-24 or 13-13-13 per 25 square foot bed (5x5; 4x6; or 3x8) four to six weeks before planting. Plant between December and February. Onions can be planted two inches apart in rows if you wish to harvest every other one for use as green onion or four inches apart if your thought is to let them grow to maturity (three or four months after planting). Rows should be 12 to 14 inches apart. Side dress with ammonium nitrate 2 TBS/25 square foot bed when they first start to grow, a month later, and every 4-6 weeks until harvest.

Deer, rabbits, and the like do not bother onions so many gardeners plant them along a garden border or a special area in the landscape garden. Some alliums are now planted for the showy flower which appears in the spring. For cooking onions, the flowers make an edible and showy addition to a spring salad. I do not know if alliums grown for their floral display are tasty or edible.

Harvest onions for immediate use any time after planting. If you plan short term storage (months) withhold water and don't let it rain for a week or two after most of the leaves turn brown or the leaf bundle bends to the ground. Pull the onion (a garden fork makes this easier), brush off what soil you can. Cut the roots to about $\frac{1}{2}$ inch, cut the top about two inches above the bulb, and put it in a shady location to dry. **DO NOT WASH THEM!!** Instead of cutting the tops, the onions may be braided to hang and dry. After they are dry (usually weeks), store in a dry, well ventilated area until use. The sweeter the onion, the shorter the storage life.

Our weather during the spring does not make harvesting onions for long term storage practical. That would require reliable drying and curing which is difficult in our rain and humidity. The most important thing about onion harvest is to wait for a week or so of dry weather before harvest and **KEEP THEM DRY.**

Diseases and treatments are described in the link below. Thrips make the greens less attractive but don't seem to impact the size or taste of the mature onion. Not mentioned in that resource is rot which, in my garden, is more of a problem. The rot, however, only occurs in times of rainy, overcast weather and it's hard to control that. Again, plant onions in soil that drains well.

<https://www.lsuagcenter.com/~media/system/3/0/f/e/30fef92f7c44b2818e86c49357ae4dbe/pub%202318%20allium%20crops%20%20onions%20shallots%20and%20garlicpdf.pdf>

Leeks

The hardest part about growing leeks is getting the seedlings. That is a low bar, though, because they are readily available on line. Though not expensive, they usually come in bunches of sixty, so you may wish to tempt a neighbor to share. Leeks can be grown from seed but take three to four months to grow from seed into transplantable seedling. Those seedlings then need another three or four months to mature.

The soil, water, fertilizer, and side dressing needs are the same as for Louisiana scallions ($\frac{1}{2}$ pound 8-24-24 per 25 ft sq of bed). They do best in full sun but tolerate some dappled light. Though leeks need moisture, soil that drains well is important.

Plant seedlings from December through February. The part that grows underground is the most desirable part so deep soil is best. Several weeks before planting, distribute appropriate fertilizer in the bed and loosen the soil. To plant the seedlings, make an indention 4-6 inches deep in the soil with a broom handle or appropriate instrument. Adequate distance between plants is six inches. Place the seedling so that the top of the smallest leaf is just above the soil surface. (This close spacing, in a small garden, saves room). Firm the soil and water deeply. Side dress a 25 ft sq bed by alternating 3 to 4 TBS of 8-24-24 with 1 TBS ammonium nitrate every four weeks.

Every few weeks, raise the level of soil around the base of the plant. this will blanch a longer stretch of neck portion of the leek. Harvest at any point of growth but they are best harvested before temperatures get to the 90s.

After harvest, leeks store well in the refrigerator for some time. In our home, we usually clean and cut the leeks and freeze them without blanching. Treated this way, they will store until harvest the following year.

The leek flowers are edible in salads or as seasoning and removing the flower does not harm the plant.

Leeks are bothered by thrips whose sucking mouth parts give the leaves a stippled appearance but that does not alter the quality of the leek.



Leeks ready for harvest. Photo by Jerry Ballanco.

