

HOW TO GROW YOUR OWN ONION SEED

After 13 years of experience in market-gardening, I would like to offer some advice to fellow ALIN friends, in regard to growing your own onion seed. You already know this favourite vegetable is a good source of income for the producers and of tasty sauces for the family! But did you know the onion is a biennial plant which takes two years to grow and give seed? In the first year, it develops a reserve - the bulb - which is the part we eat. If left unharvested, or if replanted, the bulb, after a period of rest, puts out new leaves and shoots in the second year. After between 150 and 180 days, you can harvest the seed-heads. It is simple enough, but I will give you some helpful tips.

Selecting good bulbs

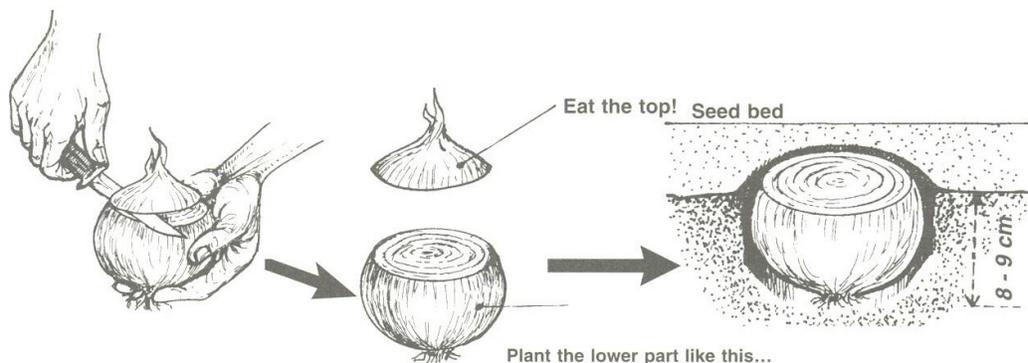
You should choose bulbs weighing about 100 grams and which haven't flowered during their first year. Bulbs that are kept in a dry, well-aired place have a better chance of preserving their capacity for flowering. 100 to 120 kgs of onions are necessary to plant a surface area of 100 m² and you can harvest 5 to 8 kgs of seed - a good supply!

When to plant?

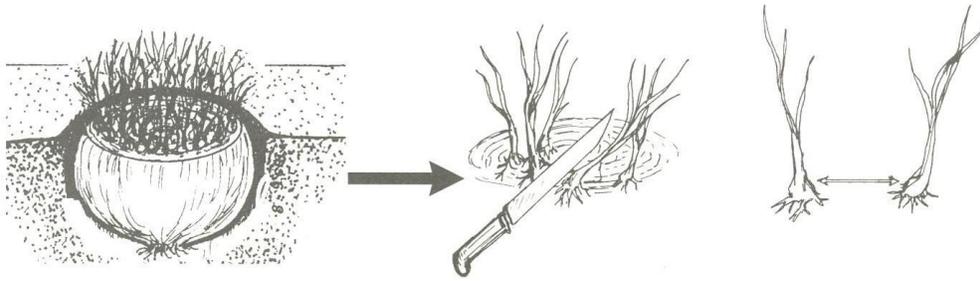
The development of the seed heads is favoured in relatively low temperatures and daylight lasting for about 10 to 12 hours. In Burkina Faso, the best time for planting onions is in the month of October, when the plants can take advantage of the cool dry weather, from December to February, which is best for the growth of flowers and seed.

Preparing the seedbed

In order to obtain young onion plants, put your onions first of all in a seedbed. Cut the bulbs as shown below in order to have a good growth. Plant them to a depth of 8 or 9 cm.



After 30 days, the bulb will sprout several young Shoots that you should separate carefully with a knife.

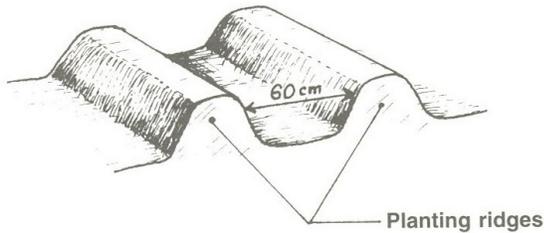


Note: each separated plant must have its own shoot.

Planting

The first stage is soil-preparation .

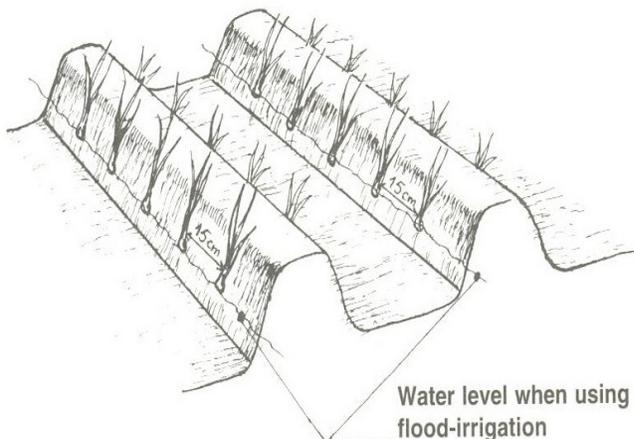
- For 100 m², mix into the soil 12 wheelbarrows full of well-rotted manure, preferably 1 month before the bedding of the plants.
- Prepare ridges 60 cm apart, and water them.



Put your onion plants into the earth on either side of the ridges as shown, 15 cms apart and two to three cms deep.

Up-keep

Control weeds in the planted area by hoeing or raking. Water very regularly because the plants should not suffer any lack of water during their flowering and maturing period or have any excess humidity. The main crop pest is thrips, a tiny insect which taps in and sucks the sap from the leaves. You can of course treat it with chemical products but you should know that attacks by thrips are more frequent



technical note

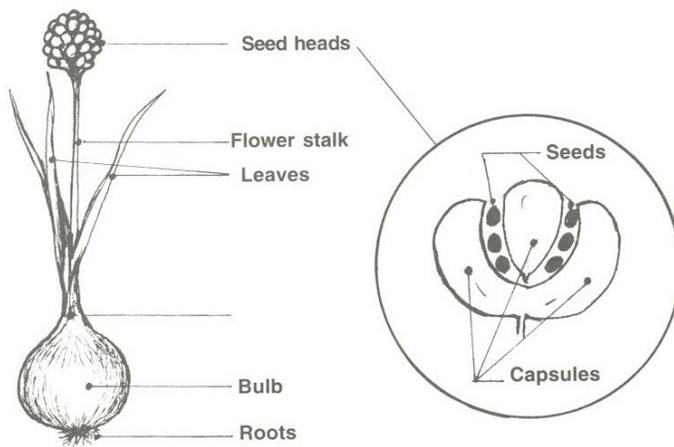
when there is a lack of water or an excess of fertilizer.

Harvesting and storing seed

Each plant will yield one bulb, some leaves and - on the top - flower heads which contain the black seeds when ripe. Harvest is done two months after the development of the flower heads. It should be done when the capsules at the top begin to open and show the black seeds inside.

The harvested tops are laid in thin layers in a dry and well-aired room so that maturation can continue. You can then proceed to thresh them when the grains are very dry.

- Take the bulbs up from the mother plants in the earth. Eat them or sell them immediately because they cannot be preserved any longer.
- Put the grains in a cotton bag in a well-aired place. Germination capacity is good for a year if they are well-stored in a cool, dry place.



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Arid Lands Information Network (ALIN) is an International NGO that facilitates information and knowledge exchange to and between extension workers or infomediaries and arid lands communities in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. The information exchange activities focus on small-scale sustainable agriculture, climate change adaptation, natural resources management and other livelihood issues.

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technical note