

How to Grow Big Onions in Glen Rose

By Bob Lancaster, Somervell County Master Gardener

For those of you that missed the Somervell County Master Gardener's Community Horticultural Educational Series last month on growing onions I thought I would discuss that topic in this article. There are several important criteria to follow to grow large onions and this article will hopefully help you master this gardening challenge.

First and foremost your garden should be located in an area that receives full sunlight for most of the day. The soil should be easily worked and weed free. If you have a heavy clay soil you might need to add some organic compost to make it more workable.

Another important criterion for growing large onions is selecting the right type of onion. Onions are classified into three categories, short day, intermediate day and long day varieties. This day length refers to the amount of daylight that is required to initiate the bulbing process in the onion. As you might imagine long day onions are developed for the northern area of the country, intermediate day onions for the middle section and the short day onions work better in the south. If a long day onion was planted in this area they would never receive enough of the long day hours (14 to 16 hours) to provide the stimulation and energy to bulb a large onion. They would have great vegetation on top but little growth on the bulb. So when you buy your onion transplants make sure they are the "short day" variety. In the past I have seen the other types sold in this area and they just won't work if you want large onions from your garden.

After you have selected your onions you now need to determine the correct time to plant your transplants. This timing should be centered on the average date for the last killing frost in your area. For the Glen Rose area the average date for the last or spring killing frost is around March 15th to 17th. This is not an absolute date for the data varies depending upon the source and freeze dates vary from season to season. You must use your own judgment in deciding exactly when to plant your transplants. Your onion transplants should be planted 4 to 6 weeks prior to this last killing frost date to ensure adequate time for leaf growth before the bulbing process starts. For this area you would plant your onions from February 3rd to February 17th for optimum growth.

As we all know Texas spring weather is unpredictable. If we do have a severe cold snap after your planting it has been my experience that onions in the ground will survive down to 18 degrees F. for short periods.

For the best growth and yield, onions need fertilizer right from the start. Use a fertilizer with the middle number higher than the other two, such as 10-20-10. Dig a trench 4 inches deep and 4 inches wide. Sprinkle ½ cup fertilizer per 10 linear feet of row and then cover the fertilizer with 2 inches of soil.

Now plant the onions on both sides of the trench about 6 inches away from the fertilizer trench. Do not plant the onions in the trench. Plant the onions no deeper than 1 inch deep. If you want the onions to grow to maturity, space them about 4 inches apart. I enjoy harvesting green onions during the growing

season so I plant mine about 2 inches apart and harvest every other one leaving the remaining ones to grow to maturity.

During the growing season it is important to keep the weeds removed and to provide adequate moisture to ensure you have a bountiful harvest. The onions should be watered thoroughly after planting and regularly thereafter. Onions have shallow roots, so don't let the soil at the base of the plants become dry and cracked. Over watering can be a problem too causing the leaves to have a yellow tinge. As the onions mature they have a greater need for water to grow the larger bulbs. However when the tops of the onions start falling over, stop watering and let the soils dry out before harvesting.

As the onions grow their nutritional needs change. Every two to three weeks after planting, fertilize with ammonium sulfate (21-0-0) in alkaline soils, or calcium nitrate (15.5-0-0) in acidic soils. Sprinkle it on top of the original fertilizer strip at the rate of ½ cup per 10 feet of row. Lightly work the fertilizer into the soil and water the plants after each application. Once the onions start bulbing (ground cracking around the plant) discontinue the fertilizer.

When the tops of the onions turn brown or yellow and fall over, it is time to harvest. Pull or dig the onions early in the morning on a sunny day. Place them in a dry sunny area for about two days. I lay my onions on a hardware cloth screen ensuring good air circulation.

How long your onions will keep depends upon how you treat them after harvest. They should be dried properly to prevent rot. After two or three days of drying the entire neck of the onion should be dry and you can now clip the roots and cut back the tops to one inch. Leaving the one inch of top will help prevent organisms that cause rot to enter the onion during storage. At this time I also remove the majority of the dirt from the onions by rubbing each one with my hands. The onions are now ready for the kitchen.

I store my onions in stackable plastic vegetable containers that provide lots of ventilation. I place the onions so they do not touch each other and place the containers in a shady area of my garage. You can also leave the tops on and hang them in the air or you can place each onion in a nylon stocking and tie a knot after each onion to provide separation. These bundles of onions can be hung in the barn or garage for storage. Periodically check for any soft onions and remove them to avoid contaminating the others.

As you can see growing big onions is not complicated, if the weather behaves and you follow a few important guidelines. I encourage you to try growing your own big onions this year and see how you do. It can be fun and the onions you grow may last you until the fall.

Sources: Dr. Sam Cotner's "Vegetable Book" and the website of Dixondale Farms, www.dixondalefarms.com

<http://txmg.org/somervell/garden-info/gardening-articles/garden-articles-2012#feb12onions>

Gardening Tips

By Shirley D. Smith, Somervell County Master Gardener

Okay, so we have not really had a winter, but thank goodness we have recently had some good soaking rain. Now, is the time to begin to “put it into high gear” and get your mind to thinking about your garden. Here are a few tips to get you started:

- ❖ Don't have room for a compost pile or want to speed up the process, then use your household blender to puree your scraps before placing them in your pile.
- ❖ This spring, try a veggie or flower that you have been reluctant to plant. Just be certain that it will grow in your soil and is not an invasive.
- ❖ Remember, if you are a resident of Somervell County you can get free mulch and compost at our local dump. If you live in another county, check and see if that service is available to you. Might be a good idea to go ahead and get a pickup load now to have on hand when you need it later.
- ❖ If you go to garage sales or thrift/junque stores, be on the lookout for kitchen utensils that you can add to your collection of useful tools.
- ❖ Since we live in Texas where you can garden almost year round, your tools are always in use. Keep a used lotion or hand soap dispenser nearby filled with mineral oil. You can squirt a bit of oil onto your metal tools every time you use them or any time you need to remove something sticky like sap, grime or sawdust.
- ❖ Got a problem with salt residue? Take those crusty pots or dirty tools and scrub with a mixture of 1/3 white vinegar, 1/3 rubbing alcohol and 1/3 water. Use an old toothbrush for this task or other used brush.
- ❖ Don't like to wear gloves when gardening? You can still keep your fingernails fairly clean by attaching a soap dish with bar soap in it near your work area. Just dig your fingernails into the soap before setting out to your garden.
- ❖ Did you get more calendars this year than you can use? How about taking it apart and laminate the page for each month. Hang the current monthly page near your outdoor work area along with a Magic Marker. Now, every time you do something in your garden that needs recording there is your calendar for that purpose! Save for later reference.
- ❖ Buy a roll of Velcro tape and either hang on a nail or put in your gardening tool container. Use the Velcro whenever you need a quick and easily adjustable tie-up of vines, shrubs and veggies.
- ❖ How about those old miniblinds that you were about to throw out? Cut them into short lengths and use them for plant labels. Be sure to use either acrylic paints or a waterproof pen.

Happy gardening!

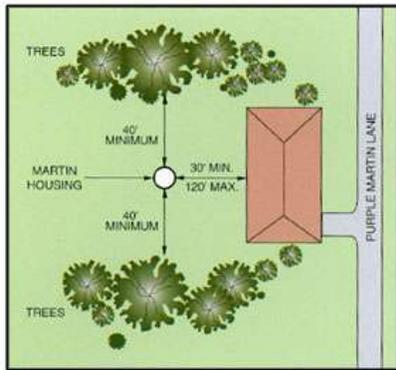
<http://txmg.org/somervell/garden-info/tips/tips-2012#febtips>

Around the Feeder-“Take Two-Purple Martins”

A follow-up to November 2011

By Joan Orr and Nancy Hillin, Somervell County Master Gardeners

Location-location-location is definitely the key when deciding where to put a Purple Martin house or gourd. Specific land and aerial space requirements are necessary in placing these homes. Always pick a site that is 40-60ft. away from trees that are taller than the house. Reason being is predators will be less likely to enter a clearing and it makes for an easy flight to home for the Martins. If possible, keep the Martin home a minimum of 30ft. to a maximum of 120ft. from your home or other structures. The design illustrated below is an example of placement of the house or gourd.

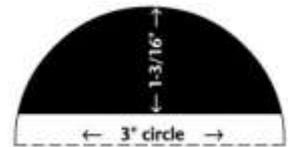


The best Purple Martin set-ups incorporate designs that easily lower and raise the house on its pole by a winch or telescoping system. This allows for quick daily inspections of the nest to check on the brood. The pole should be a least ten feet off the ground and set in concrete with a ground depth of 18-25 inches. A predator guard at the bottom of the house is a must to fiend off ground predators. These can be made of stove pipe, pvc pipe or sheet metal. Owls and crows can be predators so consider using two inch by four inch hardware cloth mesh around the house secured by clamps or bungee cords. Paint the house or gourd

white for cooler temperatures inside. Avoid attaching wires or anything that could give access to predators to the Purple Martin dwelling.



It is best to wait until the first day of February to open up your Purple Martin houses and gourds to deter other nest-site competitors. Arrivals in previous seasons in Somervell County have been February 1-18. To keep Starlings from invading Purple Martin homes, buy or build homes with crescent-shaped entrance holes. These SRCH (Starling Resistant Crescent Holes) should be three inches wide and one and three sixteenth inches tall and one half an inch above the porch floor.



Purple Martins are very social birds and will give you hours of entertainment with their aerial displays and wonderful song. They like to be near humans and a daily check on the nestlings will not bother the Purple Martin. It is a practice among Purple Martin “Landlords” to keep daily records of the numbers of eggs and hatchlings in their Purple Martin homes.

Sources: What You Should Know About the Purple Martins by J.L. Wade

<http://txmg.org/somervell/garden-info/around-the-feeder#febpurplemartin2>

Favorite Plants Of Master Gardeners

Submitted by Bonnah Boyd, Somervell County Master Gardener

Common Name: Blue salvia/mealy cup blue sage
Scientific Name: *Salvia farinacea*
Native perennial
Height: 2 - 3 feet
Spread: 1 -2 feet
Light: part shade to full sun
Flower color: dark blue, blue violet, white
Foliage: silver gray
Bloom time: April to frost
Soil: sand, loam, clay, caliche, limestone, well-drained



This plant is attractive to bees, butterflies and/or birds. Drought tolerant; suitable for xeriscaping. It is excellent in a flower bed, in well drained patio pots, and in massed plantings. It is available in nurseries. It is resistant to deer.

The silver fuzz, covering both stems and leaves, is the "mealiness" that gives the plant its name.

<http://txmg.org/somervell/garden-info/favorite-plants/favorite-plants-2012#Febsalvia>

Wade's WallyWorm Word "VIGOR"

by Wade Moore, Somervell County Master Gardener

"Say, WallyWorm, how's your vigor lately?" asks Wade

"It's great, after these good rains and warm temperatures, I feel like a new worm, and since my old worm felt pretty good, I am on top of the world." replies WallyWorm

"You might consider a few inches below the top for your own safety. Just kidding WallyWorm; let's get back to the subject of vigor, vigor being the active healthy well balanced growth, especially in plants." adds Wade



"Take for example the vigor of garden seeds. Quick emergence and a high germination rate are signs of good vigor. Mark the 1st plant to emerge if you desire to save seed, but remember, saving seed from open pollinated plants, mostly heirlooms, is the way to go. If you purchase seed that do not show the vigor you expect, cull out the plants showing the least vigor. Save seed from the best plant and then cull the seeds by sorting by size. Then sort these seeds by weight, the heavier seeds having better vigor. Then

save the top 5% for planting. Share the remaining seeds with your neighbor along with a lesson on saving seed with good vigor." continues Wade

"Another tool in your kit for saving the best seed is to select seed from plants with a high brix reading. Remember, your soil health is a major factor for high brix plants. A high brix plant produces more carbohydrates, ergo its seeds are heavier and the higher carbon content allows the seed to draw in

more soil moisture faster and germinate faster. Also, foliar feeding the plant with trace minerals increases seed quality by starting enzymatic reactions. Seeds well endowed with trace minerals grow faster and resist stress better. More vigor. Trace minerals in the seed and the plant attract like minerals from the soil and atmosphere, therefore, a higher mineral content can be promoted and accumulated over several generations of planting.” concludes Wade

“You know, I feel like I am now probably educated beyond my intelligence, but I will sleep better knowing you are awake to gather these morsels of information.” says Wallyworm, crawling back into his haven of good topsoil.

These paragraphs were harvested from articles by John C. Frank in the January and February issues of Acres USA.

<http://txmg.org/somervell/garden-info/wallyworm-word#febvigor>