Onions - Sweet Onions

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This article was originally written by Jim Stephens and seen in the Vegetarian back in 1997. Hendry County Agent Gene McAvoy updated it a few years later, and I used their words of wisdom on this month's updated version.

Last month, I was invited as a guest speaker at Disney's EPCOT Flower & Garden Festival. My presentation was on vegetable gardening basics, and I knew that giving away some fresh vegetables would make the talk more fun. Since our local gardening season was winding down, I relied on a fresh supply from Georgia, where Vidalia onions were just coming into season. So for our readers who were not at EPCOT, it may be the right time to revisit this delectable southern delicacy.

Sweet onions are available during spring and summer seasons. They have a higher water content and lower level of the strongly pungent sulfur compounds that give cooking onions their characteristic taste and smell. Their thinner skins and looser necks mean they are more easily bruised, so their shelf life is shorter. But their milder taste make them better suited for salads and lightly cooked foods.

Vidalia onions are sweet, large-bulbed onions produced in the south-central area of Georgia. An imaginative marketing campaign by the commercial onion growers has increased the brand name recognition and sales of their sweet onions. Vidalia has become a household word, and now sustains the production of some 15,000 acres of sweet onion in this region of Georgia.

The Georgia legislature has trademarked the name and has established certain mandatory guidelines for the production of this crop. To improve the visibility of this crop, the Vidalia onion was also named Georgia’s official state vegetable in 1990.

Under the terms of Federal Marketing Order No. 955, as well as Georgia state law, to be sold as a Vidalia, an onion must be grown in a 20-county area of south-central Georgia and conform to the Yellow-Granex variety specifications.

So what is so special about Vidalia onions? It is the unique combination of low sulfur soils and the mild climate of the Vidalia area that produces a milder tasting onion.
The Granex-types of onion, along with its old Texas Grano parent-type, are short day varieties that can also do well under Florida conditions. Granex 33 is a typical cultivar and has been Florida's standard recommended onion variety for farm and garden for many years.

Testing and research with sweet onions in the Hastings area near Saint Augustine has demonstrated that Florida-grown onions could match the quality of the legal Vidalia. Growers in St. Augustine were promoting St. Augustine Sweets to ride on the coat-tails of the highly successful Vidalia onion promotions. A market advantage that was explored was that Florida could get them to market 6 weeks sooner. South Central DED Charlie Vavrina reported to me that some local growers had difficulty with bulb splitting. And according to St. Johns County CED David Dinkins, the marketing challenges have not been overcome, so the St. Augustine Sweet has not made a dent in the Vidalia market.

And in the panhandle, another entry into the sweet ring onion market appeared a few years ago: Santa Rosa Sweet was Florida's first totally pesticide-free sweet onion, grown hydroponically. I heard from Santa Rosa County Horticulture Agent Dan Mullins that the Santa Rosa Sweet operation began producing them under a technology transfer grant which has now run out. They apparently have the system for Florida panhandle production worked out, but since the grant ended, they converted the space to accommodate sea oats for coastal revegetation planting, which is now their primary crop.

Many other states grow their own “sweet” onions. Since Florida’s production is not enough to compete with Georgia’s “big onion machine,” Vidalia onions now get more consumer dollars than sweet onion crops grown in other states.

Local gardeners can produce their own sweet onions. Those who wish to grow a sweet bulbing onion should select a Granex-type short day variety. For home gardeners, seed of Granex 33 will probably be the easiest to find. Seed should be planted in a properly fertilized plot in the fall (no later than mid-December) for best results. Be sure to obtain fresh seed; even year-old seed may yield poor results.

Since sulfur contributes to the pungency of onions, gardeners should avoid the application of sulfur or sulfur containing materials to the soil or plants. Note that certain fertilizers may contain sulfur.

Onions should be planted in rows 12-24 inches apart, thinned to 4-6 inches between plants. Wider spacing and good fertility yield larger bulbs. In the absence of a soil test, the garden should be fertilized with a broadcast application of 2½ to 5 lbs. of a general-purpose fertilizer, such as 6-6-6. This should be worked into the soil and a band application of 5 oz. per 10 linear feet of row applied along the side and below the row.
Since onions are shallow rooted, irrigate frequently to keep the soil moist and promote steady growth. Inconsistent watering may lead to splits, doubles and small bulbs. Side dress the crop monthly with a nitrogen fertilizer at the rate of ½-1 oz. per 10 feet of row. Be sure to keep the fertilizer from contacting the plants directly.

Good weed control is a must. Since young onions are small and grow slowly at first, they can be taken over by weeds that reduce yield. Consider using plastic mulch. Look out for diseases before they become established. Leaf blight diseases can seriously reduce yields. Monitor for insects twice each week, and use appropriate management techniques. Contact your local Extension Office for the latest information on pest management recommendations.

Bulb onions take 4-5 months to mature. A crop planted in November-December will be ready around April. The crop is ready to be harvested as the tops begin to fall over. The onions should then be lifted and left to cure for several days in a cool dry location before removing the tops. Curing will help increase the storage life of your crop, although don't expect prolonged storage.

So if you like sweet onions, they are now available in the produce stands. But come November, get out there and grow your own. While they may not be legally labeled "Vidalia," they will be every bit as good. If you wish to learn more about Sweet Onions, please visit the original on-line version of this article at: http://okeechobee.ifas.ufl.edu/News%20columns/Vidalia.onions.htm.

REFERENCES


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