

Success with Alliums

From Hudson Valley Seed's Blog post



Onions do best when they are started very early indoors. In most northern zones, now is a great time, but anytime from now until mid-March works well, in our experience. (We've had good luck direct sowing our New York Early variety, in early April, as it's a moderately-sized bulb and a quick grower.)

Chives, Garlic Chives, Leeks, and Scallions (*Allium fistulosum* types) are not particularly day-length sensitive and can be grown, harvested, and enjoyed at any time within the growing season as long as sufficient days remain before hard freeze. Starting now is great! But so is starting in March or April.

All allium seeds germinate best when sown in room-temperature conditions. Heat mats will speed up the germination but typically will result in a lower germination rate. At 65-75 degrees Fahrenheit (18-23 C) they will emerge most abundantly after 5-10 days.

Starting allium seeds is easy. Fill a flat or deep wide tray (the deeper the better) with compost-amended potting soil. Then make and firm down quarter- to half-inch furrows the length of the tray that are about 2" apart. Sow the seeds heavily

in these furrows, about 6 per inch. An alternate method for onions and scallions is to fill six-packs with amended potting soil, moisten, and then create a quarter-inch-deep dibble in the center of each cell. Drop 6-8 onion seeds or 12-15 scallion seeds into each dibble and then cover them with potting mix. (The advantage of this latter method is that transplanting is a breeze—just thin the cells to 3-5 plants each and pull and transplant the whole plug. Space them about 12" apart in the bed and they will happily grow to full size in an easy-to-weed-around clump.)

Place your trays somewhere where they'll have plenty of air to breathe and get abundant light (if using artificial light, set to no more than 12 hours per day). If you have a small fan, you can even hook it up near your trays. This will help combat any extra moisture, and it will also encourage your seedlings to develop sturdy bases which will help them when they enter the real world of the garden bed. Onions are especially sensitive to damping off, so the more air flow, the better.

TRANSPLANTING

The traditional advice for alliums is to allow them to grow until they are pencil-thick before transplanting them. However, even with a mid-February start date it is hard to achieve this by transplant time, which is about 4 weeks before the last frost (it used to be mid May on LI but, now its mid April). I think that shooting for seedlings that are between one-eighth and one-quarter of an inch in diameter is a more realistic goal. These size seedlings are easy to achieve, transplant great, and start growing within a day or two of transplanting. They produce big onions, thick leeks, and fast scallions. The thin, spindly seedlings are not worthless—they will usually catch. But they often waste days or weeks looking practically lifeless before resuming growth. Tip: for really thick seedlings, start your seeds in a tray that is very deep, around 6-8". Some growers use a window box for this purpose.