

Know your onions!

Allium is the generic name for onions, garlic, or leeks, they are recognised by a characteristic odour.

Examples of allium are:

- Spring onion,
- White (or yellow) onions
- Red onions
- Shallots
- Garlic
- leek

When to Plant: Onions and leeks can be grown from seed, but we are going to talk about growing onions from sets (which are just small onions) and leeks from ready grown seedlings.

Garlic is grown from a garlic bulb, split the bulb into individual cloves and just plant them.

Alliums can be planted in the autumn and harvested in the spring or in the spring and harvested in the summer. Both varieties are suited to growing to fit in school terms. Look at the chart at the end of this section for timings. Other varieties are available with different times for planting and harvesting but those selected, fit best with the school terms.

Where to plant: If you follow a crop rotation principle, allium follow potatoes, which will have made the soil more friable (crumbly). Ideally apply compost to the soil after the potato harvest ready for planting sets in the autumn and again in the spring.

Alliums are not suited to planting in containers, except salad onions which can be grown in a shallow planter.

Uses: onions and garlic are used in many recipes. They keep well after harvesting.

The activities with allium are:

1. Planting onion sets
2. Planting garlic bulbs
3. Planting leek seedlings
4. Weeding ☹️
5. Harvesting

Activities:

1. Planting Onion Sets

You will need:

- Onion sets
- Dibber (pencil or bit of wood)
- Stringline or a wooden rod (as in the picture) for straight line
- A tape measure
- Labels

Follow the guidance on the packet for spacing between plants and rows. (with experience you can vary the spacing, planting them closer together will give smaller bulbs)

Make a small depression in the ground and put the sets in with the 'rooty bit' going down and the 'pointy end' uppermost. The pointy bit should be level with the top of the soil. Label the onions with the variety and date of planting.



Pigeons love onion sets! After you have planted them, check them every few days and relocate (roots down, pointy bit up) those that have been pecked out of the soil by the birds.

2. Planting garlic bulbs

You will need:

- Garlic cloves
- A dibber (pencil or bit of wood)
- Stringline or a wooden rod
- A tape measure
- Labels

Follow the guidance on the packet for spacing between plants and rows. Garlic is planted slightly deeper than onions. Using a dibber, make a hole about 5cm deep and put one garlic clove into each hole.



Tip: plant all the cloves into the holes before you fill the holes. This makes it easier to check each hole has a clove in it. Also put labels at the end of each row. Give the plants a good watering.

NB You may start your garlic off by letting them start growing on a window sill indoors

3. Planting Leek Seedlings

You will need:

- Leek seedlings
- A bowl of water
- A dibber (3-5cm diameter)
- Stringline or a wooden rod
- A tape measure
- Labels

Immerse the leek seedlings in the bowl of water; untangle the roots and separate individual plants.

Use the dibber to make holes about 12cm deep for the seedlings. Drop one seedling into each hole, making sure the roots go right to the bottom of the hole. DON'T put soil into the hole, just water the seedlings. Leeks grow best in moist soil. Organic matter helps the soil retain moisture.



4. Weeding

Yes, sorry, but alliums need a lot of weeding! They don't have much foliage to stop the light getting to the weed seeds. Remove weeds regularly when they are small. It will then be a lot easier when the plants are bigger.

5. Harvesting

Harvest onions and shallots when the top of the foliage is more yellow than green and they start to fall over. Generally, you can just pull them out of the ground, or use a hand trowel.

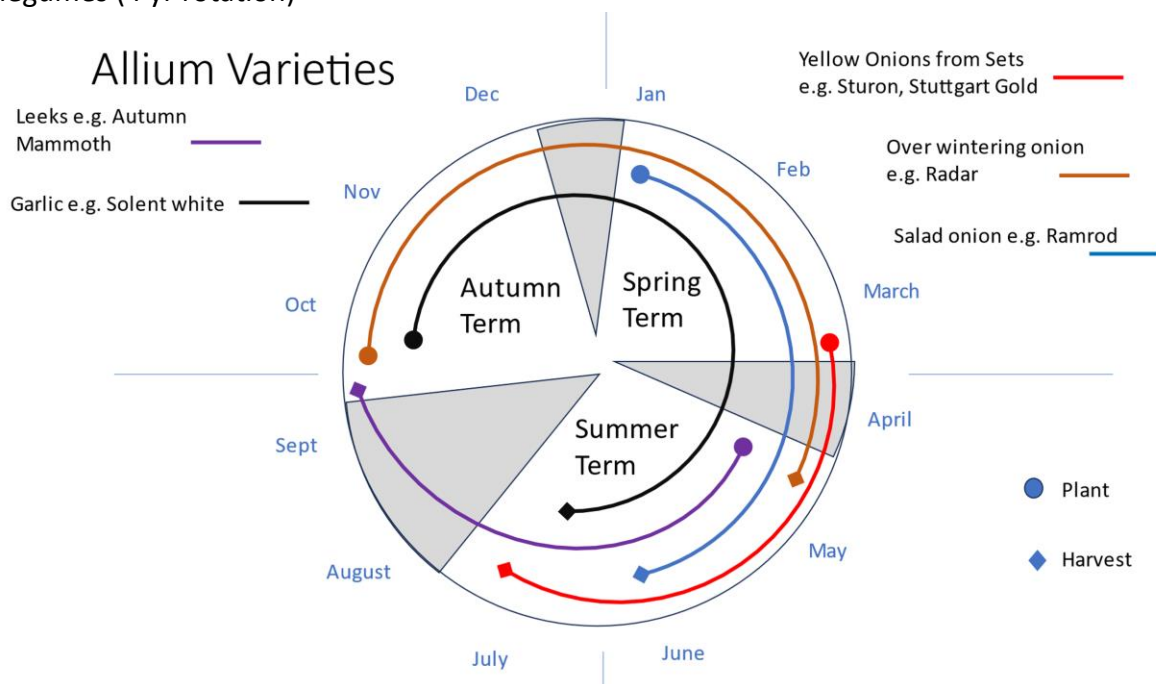
Harvest the onions on a dry day. Leave them to dry before storing. In dry weather they can be left on the soil to dry in the sun, or put them on a slatted tray under cover to dry out.



After a week or so; plait the onions or garlic and hang them in a cool dark dry place until you want to use them. Rub off any excess soil, but do not clean them completely. The dry skin helps them store for longer.

Leeks don't store, so use a trowel to lift them out of the ground as and when needed, and the rest can stay in the ground all winter.

Crop rotation If using crop rotation, follow allium either with brassicas (3 yr rotation), or legumes (4 yr rotation)



Credits Crop rotation - RHS, & Charles Dowding. Organic Gardening The Natural No dig Way