



ONIONS



INTRODUCTION

Without doubt the onion is the most used flavouring vegetable in the world. There is hardly a savoury dish that doesn't include onions or one of its relatives - white and red onions, garlic, chives, shallots, spring onions and leeks. Members of the onion family vary enormously in shape, size, colour, texture and intensity of flavour. Onions, particularly garlic, have also been used as medicines. The ancient Egyptians worshipped onions and during the Middle Ages they were used as currency.

New Zealand's top onion growing area is Pukekohe, south of Auckland.

TYPES

Red onions:

These are easily recognised by their burgundy red skins and red tinged flesh. Spanish type red onions are large and round, while Californian red onions tend to be flatter and milder. The flavour is mild, sweet and juicy and they are delicious eaten raw in salads or sandwiches and as an attractive garnish. Globe shaped red onions which are normally more pungent and taste more like a main crop onion, are also becoming available. Most readily available Jan – Aug.

Main Crop Onions:

These are the most commonly available onions and are in the shops all year round. They are strongly flavoured, firm onions with layers of golden brown paper skins and white flesh. Generally used for cooking rather than raw. The most common varieties are Pukekohe Long Keeper and Pukekohe Early Long Keeper. As the name suggests, these store particularly well.

Pickling Onions:

These are simply small main crop onions. They have a strong pungent flavour. Available all year round, but at their best for pickling about March. To peel large quantities simply top and tail then cover with boiling water for 5 minutes, drain and remove the skins which will slip off easily.

Shallots:

Sized roughly the same or slightly larger than pickling onions, with a skin colour which ranges from coppery yellow to reddish brown. The bulbs are either elongated or oval and are formed in several clusters or bulblets. The two most commonly grown varieties are Mikor which is oval with a mild flavour, and Jermor which is more elongated with a spicier flavour.

Shallots have a more delicate, sweet taste and finer texture than onions. They are considered the gourmet onion and are much favoured in French and Asian cooking. Delicious raw or cooked, shallots have a wide range of end uses. Shallots are available from Feb to July with most plentiful supply over the late summer months. They keep well in a cool dry place. In Australia, Japanese bunching onions and spring onions are often referred to as shallots.

Sweet Mild Onions:

These look similar to main crop onions but with lighter golden skins. They are generally larger and flatter with a milder flavour which makes them suitable for use raw. Sweet mild onions are significantly softer than main crop onions and some consumers mistakenly think that this softness indicates inferior quality. They are available in very limited quantities all year round, although the local season is December until May.

White onions:

White onions have a dry papery skin and perfectly white flesh, with a sharp medium flavour. They are generally available as mature, round and orange-sized. Suitable for a range of end uses including raw and pickles. They are available in limited quantities with some of the supply being imported.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Choose onions with firm flesh and dry papery outer skin. Avoid those with green shoots or soft spots.

HOW TO KEEP

Store in cool, dry, well ventilated areas in an open weave bag or open trays. In proper storage conditions good quality main crop onions can be kept for 6-8 months. Other onions do not store as long and need to be stored at 0°C, 65% humidity to prevent sprouting. Do not refrigerate or store in plastic bags as this causes condensation and encourages decay.

Consumer storage: Store in a cool, dark, well ventilated place. Don't put them in plastic bags, if purchased in plastic, remove from plastic as soon as possible. Don't refrigerate or store with any food which may absorb their flavour.

NUTRITIONAL VALUE

Onions give you some vitamin C and fibre. Scientists have recently discovered that flavenoids found in onions may protect people from heart disease.

HOW TO PREPARE

Release of the oil during peeling brings tears to the eyes - there is yet to be found a guaranteed way of avoiding this. The best advice is to just go as fast as you can! Some people try putting a piece of bread between your teeth, peeling them under running water, cutting off the root or only cutting in one direction!

WAYS TO EAT THIS VEGETABLE

Onions can be eaten raw or cooked. In many recipes onions are not the main ingredient but the flavour and texture of onion makes a great contribution. They can be used in so many dishes - soups, casseroles, pizzas, pies, with pasta, in salads, sauces, chutneys, stir-fries - to name just a few! They can be prepared or cooked in many ways too - microwaved, sauteed, fried, boiled, baked, roasted or pickled.

WHEN YOU CAN GET IT

All year round.

TIPS FOR RETAILING

Remove all loose husks. Only stock graded quality product. Try and offer a choice of large and small, red and white. Plastic causes condensation and encourages rapid deterioration, hence netting bags are preferable for merchandising. Do not place near items that might absorb flavours. Keep well ventilated.