

The Newest Trend in Gardening – Egyptian Onions

October 23, 2015

Many of you are gardeners like myself - always searching for a new experiment, new vegetables, new recipes, and new techniques. Well, egyptian onions may be the best kept secret in gardens across the county. They are hardy. They are abundant. They are perrennails. They are delicious. What's not to like?

Egyptian onions, also known as walking onions, will provide your garden with vibrant beauty and superb flavor. With bright bulblets and twirling stalks, egyptian onions provide aesthetic value to each garden they enter. Walking onions can grow up to one inch in diameter, much smaller than a typical onion. As a hybrid between the common onion and Welsh onion, there are many varieties of walking onions. One thing is for sure across all varieties: walking onions are topsetting. Multiple onion bulblets will form atop their hollow, blue-green stalks. These sets can contain anywhere from two to thirty small onions! New stalks will begin to form on each bulblet, partially giving name to their "walking" nature. Large topsets will fall to the ground as they become too heavy to be supported by their original stalk. These sets will then bury themselves into the ground, forming a root network. New stalks will begin emerging through the soil giving life to a whole new plant. A single egyptian onion plant can "walk" approximately two feet each year, forming up to six new plants.



A photograph of egyptian onions "walking." New stalks form on bulblets and a new topset begins to grow on the younger stalk.

Egyptian onions rarely flower and a seed has never been reported. Stalks can grow up to three feet tall before falling to the ground. Walking onions prefer full sunlight but can still thrive in partial shade. To plant your walking onions, you must set the bulbs directly into the soil, about two inches deep. Each walking onion bulb should be set every six to ten inches, with rows of onions no less than twelve inches apart. According to Ruthann Yeaton, an office manager at Northern Illinois University, "The further apart you plant these guys, the better. They will multiply and take over your garden if set too close together." To combat the spread of walking onions throughout her entire garden, Ruthann suggests mulching around each bed.

Although this hardy vegetable could be planted at any time of the year, walking onions typically do not fruit the first year. Anna from Big Thorn Farm advises, "Plant your walking onions in the fall if you want to harvest them during the next growing season." Anna and her husband, Aaron, own a ten acre farm in Georgetown, Illinois. They began their farm in 2011, with locust trees, hops, and a small garden for personal use. Within the past four years, their farm has grown immensely. They now harvest a variety of perrennials but continue to plant something new each year. Their recent harvest has included walking onions, hops, raspberries, sunchokes,

asparagus, horseradish, and many more. Both Ruthann and Anna utilize compost in areas of their garden. As Ruthann's garden is smaller, she uses compost in every bed. On the other hand, Anna discussed that compost is used sparsely. "We like to live off the grid as much as possible. Composting definitely helps with this but we cannot produce enough to spread across all of our land," she said.

During my chat with Ruthann Yeaton, she mentioned that maintaining her bed of walking onions was an absolute necessity. She revealed that she is constantly thinning her Egyptian onion bed during the growing season, from approximately May to October. Egyptian onions can

be harvested throughout this entire season, as well, providing food for months. The perfect time to pluck your walking onion bulbets is when they turn a brownish-purple color. If harvested before their prime, walking onions are still delicious but a little bit sweeter. Any topsets that have fallen to the ground should be harvested, too, unless you would like them to multiply. The bulbs underground are commonly harvested – but be sure to leave some in the soil for next year!



A photograph of walking onion topsets.

Ruthann also stated that although maintenance is crucial for Egyptian onions, she has to be careful when tossing them into the compost. "It's crazy. They (walking onions) will start to regrow in the compost. They are so hardy," she said. Huge flooding events may be the only thing that this vegetable cannot sustain. Egyptian onions do not like "wet feet." They prefer moderately moist soil.

The reward of tiny, delectable onions is well worth the constant maintenance of your walking onion beds. Egyptian onions can be cooked up and eaten just like any common onion. Ruthann advised, "Prepare them as you would any onion...but less. They're delicious but you must use them sparingly." Walking onions are quite pungent. Her favorite way to prepare walking onions is in homemade chili or a simple vegetable sautee. Aaron and Anna at Big Thorn Farm commented that portions of the stalks can be used in the same way that you might use chives. One of their favorite ways to prepare Egyptian onions is in a huge, hearty salad with other vegetables grown on their farm.

These hardy bulbous vegetables will provide more delicious onions than you know what to do with – making wonderful gifts for friends, family, and coworkers. But be careful, bring a fresh batch of Egyptian onions around, and you may never hear the end of it. Don't be behind the trend. Get your Egyptian onions in the ground now!

References

Anna. Big Thorn Farm. Personal Communication. September 24, 2015.

Mahr, Susan. "Egyptian Walking Onions." *Wisconsin Master Gardener Program*. Volunteers in Horticulture, 17 July 2009. Web. 23 Oct. 2015.

Ruthann Yeaton. Office Manager for ESE Institute/ENVS at Northern Illinois University. October 19, 2015.

Tracy. "Egyptian Walking Onion." *Egyptian Walking Onion*. N.p., 2015. Web. 13 Oct. 2015.