

Allium cepa

[Synonyms : *Allium ascalonicum*, *Allium cepa* var. *aggregatum*, *Allium cepa* var. *multiplicans*, *Allium cepa* var. *proliferum*, *Allium cepa* var. *solaninum*, *Allium salota*, *Porum cepa*]

ONION (English, Japanese) is a bulbous annual, or biennial. Probably native to Iran it has white or purple flowers.

It is also known as *Ajuin* (Dutch), *Arpadžik* (Serbian), *Basal* (Arabic), *Bawang* (Malay), *Bawanj* (Malayalam), *Bazal* (Hebrew), *Besalim* (Hebrew), *Bolle* (German), Brown onion, Bulb onion, *Bwàx fàlangx* (Laotian), *Cebola* (Portuguese), *Cebolla* (Spanish), *Cebolla macho* (Spanish), *Čebul* (Slovenian), *Cebula* (Polish), *Čebula* (Slovenian), *Cebula jadalna* (Polish), *Cebula zwyczajna* (Polish), *Cepo* (Esperanto), *Cibul'a* (Slovak), *Cibul'a kuchynská* (Slovak), *Cibule* (Czech), *Cibule kuchyňská* (Czech), *Cipolla* (Italian), Common onion, *Cong tou* (Chinese), *Crlenec* (Croatian), *Crljenac* (Croatian), *Crni luk* (Serbian), *Crni lukac* (Serbian), *Crui luk* (Bosnian, Croatian), *Crvenac* (Serbian), *Crveni luk* (Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian), *Củ hành tây* (Vietnamese), Cultivated onion, *Czosnek cebula* (Polish), *Dungali* (Gujarati), *Dungari* (Sindhi), *Dunzari* (Gujarati), Garden onion, *Gartenzwiebel* (German), *Glavata ljutika* (Serbian), *Hành tây* (Vietnamese), *Hagyma* (Hungarian), *Hom farang* (Thai), *Hom huayai* (Thai), *Hom yai* (Thai), *Irulli* (Tamil), *Kanda* (Marathi), *Kapula* (Serbian), *Kepaløk* (Norwegian), *Khtüm barang* (Khmer), *Kitunguu* (Swahili), *Kokar* (Macedonian), *Kremmydi* (Greek), *Kromid* (Serbian), *Kromit* (Serbian), *Kromiti luk* (Serbian), *Küchenzwiebel* (German), *Kyet thun ni* (Burmese), *Løg* (Danish), *Lök* (Swedish), *Luk* (Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian), *Lukac* (Serbian), *Luk repchatyi* (Russian), *Lunu* (Singhalese), *Matlök* (Swedish), *Mrki luk* (Serbian), *Nirulli* (Kannada, Telugu), *Oignon* (French), *Ougniao* (Channel Islander-Guernsey, and Channel Islander-Jersey Norman-French), *Palandu* (Bengali, Sanskrit), *Peyaz* (Persian, Punjabi), *Phak bouo* (Laotian), *Piaja* (Oriya), *Piyaj* (Bengali), *Piyaz* (Assamese, Hindi, Urdu), Potato onion, *Punasipuli* (Finnish), *Pyaaaz* (Hindi, Persian, Urdu), *Pyaz* (Hindi, Nepali, Urdu), *Rata-lunu* (Singhalese), *Ruokasipuli* (Finnish), Scallion, *Schalotte* (German), *Sejanac* (Serbian), *Sibuyas* (Tagalog), *Sijanac* (Croatian, Serbian), *Sipuli* (Finnish), *Soğan* (Turkish), *Sommerzwiebel* (German), *Speisezwiebel* (German), *Tama negi* (Japanese), *Tewma bajda* (Maltese), *Ui* (Dutch), *Ulli* (Malayalam), *Vanlig lök* (Swedish), *Vengayam* (Tamil), *Venkaayam* (Tamil), *Voćak* (Serbian), *Vöröshagyma* (Hungarian), Wild onion, *Yang cong* (Chinese), *Yang pa* (Korean), *Yuan cong* (Chinese), *Zwiebel* (German), and *Zwiebellauch* (German); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of eternity, immortality, oneness, primal cause, unity, and universe (layers of skin).

Large Spanish onions are mild while smaller English onions have a stronger flavour.

Onion's bulb has a similar appearance to that of meadow saffron corms (*Colchicum autumnale*), or hyacinth (*Hyacinthus orientalis*) or tulip (*Tulipa*) bulbs.

Warning – onion can be poisonous for some animals.

Cepa is derived for some authorities from Celtic *cep* (head), is said by some to mean 'headed', and is the Latin name for onion (often spelled *caepa*).

The Old English name was *ine* and the modern word Onion is derived from the French *Oignon* which not only means a 'bulb' but 'onion' too.

Onion's origins are uncertain as it has been in cultivation so long. But some authorities believe it could be a native of northern Asia and Palestine, and it is also believed by quite a few authorities to have been cultivated in Egypt from at least 3200 BC where some say it was worshipped as a symbol of the Universe. Certainly many authorities claim that with garlic (*Allium sativum*) or leeks (*Allium ampeloprasum* var. *porrum*), or garden parsley (*Petroselinum crispum*) it formed part of labourers' wages when the pyramids were being built by Pharaoh Cheops (26th Century BC). [Some Egyptologists have recently suggested that the relevant records are actually referring to offerings made to Egyptian deities.] In about 2000 BC it was an ingredient in the Chaldean diet, and some authorities suggest that when the Hebrews were wandering in the Sinai desert in about 1200 BC (after their exodus from Egypt) they had become so used to onion (as much as leek) in their food while undergoing the hard labour inflicted upon them by their Egyptian masters that it was hardly surprising that they then bewailed the lack of it. In 42 AD Columella, the 1st Century Roman writer noted for his works on agriculture and forestry, referred to *unionem* from which the modern name could be derived, and in addition to Roman records, Chaldean, ancient Egyptian and ancient Greek records all refer to the plant as well. Alexander the Great (356-323 BC) whose armies are supposed to have eaten onion as a regular part of their provisions (supposedly to encourage warlike tendencies) is traditionally held to have introduced the onion to Greece. Authorities believe it was especially popular in Rome (where as in Greece it was not least recognized as food for the poor) and because of its ability to promote thirst it was eaten throughout meals.

The onion has long been used in western Europe and although France tends to be associated with garlic (particularly for the English who usually prefer the onion or leek to the latter) the onion still holds some sway in northern France. Feudal deeds witness the fact that the vegetable was being eaten by rich and poor alike in France in the Middle Ages as it often formed a part of rent and a symbolic string of onions could also be offered on occasion as recognition of sovereignty. Today the French can even boast a formally registered religious sect in Paris known as the Worshippers of the Onion (with a following of about 4,000 at the end of the 20th Century). Authorities note that onions were popular in England in the early 13th Century when the English scholar, Alexander Neckham (1157-1217) as abbot of Cirencester which he became in 1213, listed the onion as a vegetable that could be cultivated successfully for the tables of the wealthy. Some writers then contend that although onions were also extremely popular in England in the 16th and 17th Centuries this was nothing compared with the enthusiasm for them today.

They are mentioned in several of the plays of the famous English bard, William Shakespeare (1564-1616) with particular reference to their ability to bring tears to the eyes. In *All's Well that Ends Well* he wrote

Mine eyes smell onions, I shall weep anon.-.....

And again, in *Antony and Cleopatra*

.....and, indeed, the tears live in an onion, that should water this sorrow.

Across the Atlantic, the onion was being cultivated in New England by the early 17th Century. Records show that quite a few North American Indian tribes included onion in their diet not least the Navajo, Seminole, Haisla, Neeshenam, Hanaksiala, Oweekeno and Havasupai. Some of the Navajo stored them for eating during the Winter. The Iroquois tribe used the bulb to obtain both a green and a yellow wool dye. Then as a medicine both the Mohican and the Shinnecock Indians took a chopped onion syrup as a remedy for colds. The latter also used onion to treat earache and had such faith in the bulb that they believed if placed in a sick room it could absorb any symptoms of influenza.

Ancient records show that the onion was used for some love divination rituals, and in later centuries if peeled or cut was believed to be able to give protection from witches. As a love charm the onion was significant in several English practices. The initials of possible suitors were etched on separate bulbs which were then put to one side. It was said that those on the onion which sprouted first would indicate the future husband. Another required the use of a red onion on 21st December (St. Thomas' Eve) and not only involved a special incantation but also required that the onion be placed under the pillow that night. Today it is still believed that dreaming of an onion is lucky. Superstitious custom also extended to curing various ailments or easing pain eg. earache could be relieved by holding a roasted onion to the ear, a mixture of honey, salt and bruised onion rubbed into a bald patch would encourage hair growth, an onion skin on the big toe was a sure cure for earache, and if a schoolboy rubbed his hand with onion before a hand-caning the pain would be reduced. In contrast to all of the foregoing however there were also many who believed that a cut, raw onion left inside the house brought bad luck, although if a stranger entered the dwelling this onion could also absorb any of that individual's infections. The persistence of some of these superstitions can be surprising. As recently as 1968 it was reported that a Cheshire farmer's wife was convinced that the family farm had been immune to foot and mouth disease prevalent in surrounding farms because she had put onions on the doorways and windowsills of the cowsheds.

Onions played their part in weather forecasting in the English countryside. One of the relevant sayings ran

Onion skin very thin,
Mild winter coming in,
Onion skin thick and tough,
Coming winter cold and rough.

Onion skins yield a yellow dye and onion juice is well known to most schoolchildren for providing the 'ink' for secret writing. The message penned in the juice can be made to re-appear by carefully holding the paper near the warmth of a flame.

As a cosmetic aid a mixture of onion juice and vinegar was applied to freckles and spots in 15th Century England.

Today the onion attracts the interest of a limited (compared with the leek, *Allium ampeloprasum* var. *porrum*) number of enthusiastic English gardeners as a subject for 'giant' competitions. An onion exhibited in Yorkshire in 1992 is said to have weighed in at 11 lb. 2 oz. and was claimed to be the largest in the world at that time.

For India the onion is an important trading commodity. (Although it should perhaps be noted that many Indians dislike onion and garlic (*Allium sativum*) to eat – no doubt a traditional or hereditary distaste particularly for those of Aryan descent as, although when the Aryans conquered areas of northern India they permitted the defeated population to continue to eat the vegetables, they themselves abstained.) Onions are cultivated on a large commercial scale and are exported to other parts of Asia particularly in the south-eastern region.

In some parts of India the onion has acquired a reputation as an aphrodisiac.

Medicinally, European herbalists recommended onion and onion juice for healing burns, sores and ulcers, treating the symptoms of various epidemics experienced in medieval times, curing chilblains and removing warts. The juice (particularly in the form of a syrup) was also used to ease swellings, to treat not only children's coughs and colds but also patients with diphtheria, and it was believed to be a helpful remedy for insect bites too. Today there is much intensive research into the use of onion in medicine.