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Onions are one of the few vegetables that can be planted from late September to late October in middle Georgia. Since Georgia has become internationally known for the world-famous Vidalia onion, and since they are so good, many gardeners have asked how to grow this unique onion.

The characteristics (size, shape, color, sweetness, etc.) of the onion bulb that will be harvested next spring can be directly attributed to two factors-genetics and environment. Where then, do we gardeners fit in? We determine, for one thing, what those onions will be like by our selection of the appropriate genetic material and by properly managing the environment.

Genetics first. There are many onion varieties available to gardeners. All of these fall into one of three day-length groups: short day, long day, or intermediate. The short day group contains the true Vidalia onion as well as the Vidalia types.

Why is day length important when it comes to growing onions? Bulb formation in onions is primarily a day length response. In short day onions, bulbing begins when a day length of approximately 11 hours occurs. In Georgia, this day length is usually achieved in the spring during February and early March.

Now for environment. Sweetness of onions is directly related to the amount or concentration of sulfur-containing compounds within the bulb. In order to grow a low pungency "Vidalia type" onion, gardeners should apply only low to moderate amounts of sulfur to their onion soils. High rates of sulfur and late applications increase bulb sulfur content and therefore onion pungency.

Following are some recommendations for growing sweet "Vidalia type" onions in your garden.

- (1) Select a short day, sweet onion variety such as Granex 33, Granex 429, or Sweet Vidalia.
- (2) In middle and south Georgia, direct seed in the garden in late September or early October or set transplants after extreme cold temperatures have passed (20 degrees F or less).
- (3) Maintain a soil pH of 6.0 to 6.5 and provide an adequate supply of nutrients. Apply no more than one ounce of actual sulfur per 150 square feet and do not apply sulfur after December 31.
- (4) Apply adequate water so plants do not get moisture stress.

Some gardeners will find it difficult if not impossible to grow the very sweet, mild "Vidalia type" onion. Heavier soils tend to hold more sulfur and such soils may contain enough residual sulfur to make onions hot. It should be fun to try anyway.

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