



# Harvesting, Curing and Storing Onions

## What do we need to consider when harvesting onions?

- Onions should be harvested when at least 50% of the onion necks have weakened and the leaves (tops) have fallen over.
- On sunny, breezy days, onions can be pulled and left in the field to allow the necks to dry before curing.
- Avoid harvesting onions after a rainfall, or when the humidity is too high as this will increase susceptibility to postharvest disease.
- Defective onions (i.e., sprouted, insect damaged, sun scalded, bruised) should not be stored.



Figure 1. Onions drying in the field

## Curing onions

- Leave the onion tops still attached at full length or trim them to a length of 2 to 3 cm.
- Ideally, the tops should remain attached until they are completely dry. This will reduce disease potential and increase bulb weight.
- Do not stack onions with tops intact or place them into a bag because they will not cure properly.
- Cure the onions in a warm, dry and well-ventilated area by placing them on trays (Fig. 2), or hanging them in bunches (Fig. 3). It is also possible to just leave the onions in the field on a dry soil surface if the weather permits (Fig. 1).
- Optimum curing conditions are 20 to 30°C and 60 to 70% relative humidity.



Figure 2. Onions curing (single layer) on trays

## Storing onions

- After cured, onions are best stored in a cool, moderately dry area in containers that allow air to move through them.
- The optimum storage conditions are 0 °C, 60 to 70 % relative humidity, with no exposure to light.
  - Avoid high temperatures since they will cause weight loss / shrinkage and induce sprouting of the bulbs.
  - High relative humidity will induce growth of new roots and mold, and exposure to light induces greening of the outer scales.
  - High temperature and humidity will also result in considerable rotting.
- The later maturing pungent onions can be stored up to 6 to 9 months and their storage ability is influenced by cultivar and growing conditions.
- Mild type or sweet onions usually store only 1 to 3 months.



Figure 3. Onions hanging in bunches

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Reference: USDA Handbook 66

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