

Seed Saving for Allium Growers - Continued

Bulbing Onions (*Allium cepa* – *Cepa* group)

By far the most common and complex group of onions. They are seed producing biennials that can be propagated either seed-to-seed or seed to bulb to seed. There is a great deal of Extension literature on local varieties, day length sensitivity and culture. After several years of growing them, I still prefer the old traditional Stockton Yellows for their flavor, and ease of growing, curing and storing. My only complaint is not being able to grow enough – the more we have the more we eat. To grow them, plant seed in Nov. or Dec. either direct or in flats. Set out in early spring. You can purchase transplants and set them out in early spring, or set them out in Oct-Dec for both bulbing and blooming plants. Vernalization (cold chill) of the young plants will cause those larger than a pencil to bolt when days get longer – you have the choice of growing them to seed, or eating them like bunching onions. Most of our bolting onions go direct from the garden to the grill – good eats!

The seeds tend to be brittle, so handle them gently. The germination rate will decline to 50% after two years in proper storage so grow out unused seed for scallions.

Japanese Bunching Onions (*Allium fistulosum*)

I grow them because they are always available, in all seasons. In the kitchen, you can use them as a substitute for scallions and for bulbing onions. The flavor is distinctive and there is no onion easier to grow – plant them once and eat them often. They are biennials with fertile flowers that produce seed, and they will occasionally cross-pollinate with bulbing onions. I have a cross of them with Stockton Yellows that produce an enlarged bulbous base (yellow in color), alas, they do not cure or store well. To keep the purity of my bulbing onion stock, I clip off the bunching onion seed stalks before they flower.

Common Chives (*Allium schoenoprasum*)

So easy to grow, maintain and propagate, yet so seldom grown. I leave my chives to fend for themselves and there they are year after year, ready for use. In this climate they will winter over dormant and emerge in Feb. Most common Chive seeds on the market is all one variety – purple blooming, although there are other varieties.

Garlic Chives (*Allium tuberosum*)

The plant looks like miniature leeks with flat leaves and have a mild garlic flavor. They bloom profusely in late summer with a bonnet of white flowers that insects love. I grow them in parsley beds and in clusters with Common Chives. The seeds are very easy to collect. The dry seed stalks and bonnets of white blossoms are attractive additions to flower beds.

Beyond the Ordinary

Most American based seed catalogs offer one to a few varieties of leek seeds. Some will distinguish between winter and summer types, but most do not. If you want a picture of how Europe treats leeks, take a look at the catalog for [Graines Baumaux French Seed Company](#) (rudimentary French language skills required for navigation). They list 25 varieties including some you will not find anywhere else.

Bulbing leeks? Yes, they are related to garlic, but still able to reproduce by seed (garlic only reproduce vegetative by bulbs and bulbils). The common one is Elephant Garlic - actually a leek that forms bulbs and is propagated by bulblets like true garlic. The Portuguese onion is another bulbing leek, also known as Perlzwiebel. The head divides into small, round bulblets resembling pearl onions that range from pearl size to an inch in length. There is one listing in the Graines Baumaux French Seed Company catalog.

The Los Mol wild leek is perhaps the least know of the bulbing leeks. It was once widely cultivated in church gardens and is now naturalized throughout Europe (primarily in Spain and the United Kingdom). Some of the naturalized European stands now are being harvested for commercial purposes because of the interest among gardeners. Each bulb divides into four bulbs that sometimes have hard bulblets attached, like elephant garlic. Either the full bulb or the bulblets can be used for propagation. There is one listing in the Seed Savers 2006 Yearbook.

Finally there is the North American wild leek (*Allium tricoccum*), also known as ramps. Although not a bulbing leek, it is a wild gourmet plant that can be cultivated in the home garden. Ramps are found from North Carolina to Canada and are collected in the spring starting in the south and moving north. For more information consult [Wikipedia](#), and [The Ramp Farm](#).

Without onions, there is no cuisine, just food – so grow some! They even look good and grow well in flowerbeds and pots.

till next time,

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