Onions

Onions take about six months from sowing through to harvesting. There are a number of varieties, of which 'Pukekohe Long Keeper' is the most popular and most widely grown. I like to sow them in autumn, using Oderings Potting & Basket Mix. Always use fresh new seed because onion seed does not keep well. When sowing, firm the mix down, sow seed lightly, and then cover with about 1cm more of the potting mix and water gently. When buying seedlings, I transplant them 8–10cm apart in a single or double row, with rows 40–50cm apart. The onions are ready to harvest six months later, when the tops dry out and fall over. At this time dig them up and leave them to cure and dry in the sunshine, then store in a well-ventilated, dry area.

Garlic

If you love to cook with garlic but have never tried to grow your own, then there is no time like now to give it a go. Growing garlic is easy and with a little know-how, this can become one of the many successful crops we can help you to grow this season. Traditionally garlic is planted on the shortest day of the year and harvested on the longest; these dates however are really just a timeline to help us to remember to do so. By planting earlier and harvesting a little later your bulbs will be a larger size and will still be bursting with juicy goodness.

Garlic is easily grown in containers or in the garden, but wherever you grow them it's essential that they have good drainage. Incorporate plenty of compost into the soil, as well as 'bone flour', which gives a huge boost of calcium and phosphorous, which is specifically good for any kind of bulb or root crop. Dig both compost and bone flour into the root zone at the time of planting, adding 1–2 teaspoons of the bone flour per bulb. Use only certified garlic from your garden centre; don't use those you bought for cooking from the supermarket.

Plant each clove of garlic 5–8cm below the soil surface and about 15cm apart, making sure the pointed end is facing upwards. Use only the bigger 'juicy' looking bulbs, as the small ones really won't do much and are a waste of space. These smaller ones, you can use in cooking just like shop-bought garlic bulbs. It is important to keep the area weed free and well watered during the summer.

When harvesting, make sure you dig up the garlic; do not rip it out of the ground. If you lift garlic too early you will have smaller cloves, whereas if they are left too long they will burst. Once you have dug up your garlic, gently brush off any soil clinging to the bulbs, being careful not to gouge them. Allow three to four weeks of drying in a well-ventilated situation or in a dry, shady spot outside, away from direct sunlight. When the tops and roots have dried, cut them off, again being careful to not damage the bulbs.

Asparagus

Once established, asparagus plants are very long lived and can produce spears for up to twenty years. Don't worry if you're in an area where you get frost, as asparagus dies down each winter and will produce new shoots or spears in the spring.

Light soils are preferred, so the spears can easily push through the soil surface. Before planting the crowns, prepare the soil to the depth of a spade by digging in liberal quantities of compost then adding a general garden fertiliser. If you have acidic soils, then a light dressing of garden lime will be needed.

In the first growing season set crowns 15–20 cm deep and 30–50 cm apart at the bottom of a trench. Then fill the trench with an initial 5cm of soil. Add more soil as the asparagus starts to grow. Water regularly and give liberal dressings of a high nitrogen fertiliser, such as Oderings Garden Replenish, in summer to encourage vigorous top growth. In winter, cut the dry, yellow fern down to ground level and fertilise again to encourage spears in spring.

Do not cut any spears in the first season of planting. Spear numbers increase each year as the plant grows older (reaching full bearing in four to five years). In the second year, start cutting the spears as they appear (generally in August or September depending on where you live). Harvest spears every day or two and continue cutting for eight to ten weeks.

Shallots

Shallots are basically mild onions; they reproduce by bulb division underground and require the same growing conditions as garlic. When their green shoots show above ground level, they can be cut off and used like chives. Shallots need to be planted about 20cm apart, and should produce six to ten bulbs per plant. Like garlic they are also planted on the shortest day and harvested on the longest. Prepare them in the same way you would garlic, in a well-ventilated, dry situation. Well-cured shallots will keep for at least nine months.

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Onions, Garlic, Shallots & Asparagus

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