

Shallots – more than just small onions!

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Background

Shallots belong to the class of plants known as Liliaceae or Lillies, which has more than 500 sub-species. Other family members include tulips, hyacinths, aloe vera and asparagus. Further down the family tree, shallots are from the allium genus, part of the alliaceae family, as are onions, garlic, leeks and chives.

Documentation on the ancient Egyptians, Romans and Hebrews shows that alliums have been cultivated for between 4,000 and 5,000 years.

Tomb paintings of both the old and new Kingdoms of ancient Egypt portray onions growing in the field. It is likely that they were then introduced to India, on to Persia and Egypt, and to the Mediterranean region by traders.

The ancient Greeks gave shallots their name when their traders discovered them in the ancient Palestinian port of Ashkalon (now Ashkelon in Israel) and named them after the city. Shallots were first introduced to Europe by the crusaders returning from the Middle East in the 11th century

The word shallot comes from the Old French word escalogne from the Latin Ascalonia caepa (onion of Ascalon).

The Latin name for shallot is *allium cepa aggregatum* and is also known as *allium ascalonicum*, which refers to the vegetable's origins in Ashkalon in the Middle East.

While shallots are closely associated with traditional French recipes, such as beef bourguignon, they are a truly international vegetable. Shallots are an authentic ingredient of many Asian cuisines's from Thai soups and red and green curries to Indonesian and fried rice dishes such as nasi goreng.

Nutritional content

Vitamins & antioxidants

- The health properties of all fruit and vegetables have been the subject of wide research. The findings suggest that fruit and vegetables may contain nutrients and compounds that may help the body destroy carcinogens (cancer-causing agents) before they damage cells, thereby reducing some cancers. It seems to be the antioxidant properties (the ability to neutralise harmful free-radicals in the body) of vitamins such as A and C that offer this defence
- The US Journal of Agricultural and Food Chemistry carried out a study in 2004 which indicates that some onion varieties may contain more health-promoting substances than others. Shallots had the highest antioxidant content of the varieties tested

Minerals, calories & fat

- Shallots are a source of potassium, which is important for maintenance of stable blood pressure, and are low in sodium.
- Shallots contain good levels of allicin. Allicin is thought to help lower blood cholesterol levels, promote good heart health and stimulate the body's immune system

- An 80g serving of shallots (which counts as one portion towards the recommended five portions of fruit and vegetables a day) contains 40-50 calories. They contain a negligible amount of fat
- Two of the UK's most popular slimming clubs acknowledge that shallots are a good choice for those on a weight loss diet. Slimming World (www.slimming-world.co.uk) calls shallots 'free food' and at Weight Watchers (www.weightwatchers.co.uk) shallots have 'no points'. Shallots can be eaten freely on these and other slimming diets.

Typical nutrient values

	Shallots	Onions
Protein	2.1g	1.3g
Fat	0.2g	0.2g
Carbohydrates	11.0g	7.8g
Vitamin C		
Fresh	10.00mg	5.0mg
Cooked	5.0mg	2.0mg
Total sugars	10.6%	6.8%
Made up of: sucrose	1.8%	1.7%
Fructose	1.9%	1.0%
Glucose	4.9%	3.2%
Complex sugars	1.9%	0.5%

My method of shallot cultivation

Traditionally shallot bulbs were planted on the shortest day; the 21st December and harvested on the longest; the 21st of June, however I don't always stick to this rule. I found that by planting them that early they would not begin to sprout until mid-January, so that's when I now plant them in 10cm square pots containing potting compost placed in a sunny, cold and well ventilated greenhouse. At that time of year the days are just beginning to lengthen, which I believe is a big advantage. Shallots don't mind a degree or two of frost, which often happens at that time of year, but don't let the pots dry out.

Don't plant bulbs back by size either, rather select bulbs on the basis of shape – I like the high shoulder type shapes best of about 5cm diameter and high quality as far as freedom from disease is concerned.

I grow around 40 bulbs in this way, which is a reasonable number to look after and should give an adequate selection for showing, eating and a few spares.

The shallots are ready to plant out in their final position when the tops are around 22cm tall, by which time they will be quite pot-bound.

I grow mine on the allotment, which provides an open, sunny position with well drained loam that has been fertilised about 3 weeks beforehand with a compound containing 12.11.18 NPK plus calcium, sulphur and trace elements at a rate of 100g/square metre.

The pH value is 6.5 and the same ground has grown shallots and other alliums continuously for 5-6 years now.

I try and plant out just before a rain shower (to save watering) in mid-April at 30cm apart and 45cm between rows, which gives room for development and space to hoe between.

No further treatments are given except perhaps an occasional dressing of slug pellets and a spray for thrips.

In mid May the clumps begin to show signs of separation by opening up with a slight flattening of the foliage. I reduce the number of developing bulbs to four per clump simply by removing excess by pressing downwards on the individual until a re-assuring click indicates it has snapped away, these are usually our first fresh vegetables of the season. I try to remove the obvious inferior or smaller bulbs in this way to leave a symmetrical unit of four bulbs.

Another month or so passes by before lifting during which time the bulbs expand and the foliage dies back.

Harvesting

Clumps are lifted entire simply by placing a fork underneath and lifting. I break up the clumps immediately and grade the bulbs by size still with their tops intact into different plastic trays obtained from the local supermarket.

They are taken from the plot to home where they are allowed to dry out completely in the same greenhouse where they were started into life.

This might sound a little unscientific, but I am convinced shallot bulbs still get bigger after lifting and they certainly round off any flat sides. I spread out the bulbs on sheets of polystyrene on my greenhouse benching, turning them occasionally thus allowing them to dry out completely to a lovely golden brown colour, still without removing any skins and tops.

Show preparation

It is vital for any show to bench exactly what the schedule stipulates and provide what the judge is looking for in terms of condition, colour, uniformity and size, in that order. I prepare any hopeful specimens by removing the tops, now completely dried out and brittle and removing the outer dried skins to reveal an unbroken nicely coloured layer. The attribute of uniformity not only means in size, but also in shape and colour, so it is important to match up the correct number of bulbs required plus a few spares, if possible, to allow the best final choice.

Necks are tied as neatly as possible using natural raffia and the tops trimmed back with some sharp scissors to within 1cm of the raffia. There is an art to this and I am not good at it, but hopefully the quality of the bulbs will overcome this. Some exhibitors soak the neck of the bulb in hot water to give it some elasticity whilst tying, but I haven't found this necessary. Finally, trim the root plate with a sharp knife to leave a flat base, so the bulb should stand up vertical under its own weight.

Staging shallots at a show

If the show doesn't already provide a plate or dish for your exhibit (which personally I feel it should so that everyone is equal at the start) then select a plate or dish that is in

scale with your bulbs. If your bulbs are small don't use an enormous plate, that only accentuates the smallness of your bulbs and vice versa.

I also have different coloured sands depending on the hue of my bulbs, which can further enhance the exhibit.

That's about it as far as staging is concerned except to mention that it is critical to provide the correct number of bulbs according to the schedule, too many is better than too few!