

The Seed Savers Allium Quiz

A seed is a plant's way of fulfilling the imperative to reproduce, even though some do it without seeds. For many food plants, human participation is essential for reproduction and continuation. For the humans, successful plant reproduction is an imperative for survival – thus we save seeds.

But, what about those plants that reproduce without sex or seeds, or those that reproduce both with and without sex and seeds. Such are the intricacies of reproduction that the gardener must know:

Which plant produces pollen, but not seeds, and has fruits that grow into new plants?

A – Garlic, B – Leeks, C – Egyptian Walking Onions

Which plant has flowers but only reproduces asexually?

A – Garlic, B – Leeks, C – Egyptian Walking Onions

Which plant has flowers, but is not self-pollinating and reproduces both sexually and asexually?

A – Garlic, B – Leeks, C – Egyptian Walking Onions

(For the impatient reader, the correct answer is C, A, B, as explained in the remaining paragraphs.)

If you are a gardener that wants to maintain your own collection of culinary Alliums you must be acquainted with the intricacies of their reproduction in order to know who to plant next to whom or which parts to keep and which to eat (sometimes those parts are the same.)

Egyptian Walking Onions (*Allium cepa* – *Proliferum* group)

Although not a common Allium in the soup pot, they are desirable in the kitchen garden because they are perennial, storable and virtually indestructible. You can plant them in your flowerbeds, eat the top setting bulbs without disturbing your flowers and have a great conversation starter. Beware though that the top setting onions produce fertile flowers that can cross-pollinate with the *cepa* group of bulbing onions. The top setters, Egyptian or walking onions form an edible bulb rather than a seed head. Both the top and basal bulbs are used for propagation. Of course, they don't actually walk, but when the bulbs on long bloom stalks fall over they will root and spread the onion patch into new territory.

Leeks (*Allium ampeloprasum*)

Although leeks are not very popular in this country, they are cold hardy, easy to propagate and effortless to grow. They produce perfect flowers (mostly) and are easily cross-pollinated by insects. You might think bees, but flies are also a major pollinator. If you don't want to isolate varieties by a mile or so, or bag them and hand pollinate, try growing just one variety at a time; or, staggering these biennials so that only one variety blooms each year. They will not cross-pollinate with onions or garlic. However, the flower heads take longer to mature than onions so be patient when growing for seed. When the seed heads are ripe, I often reseed directly in the beds without bothering to harvest, clean and store seed. If you leave the seed producing leek plant in the bed, it may look like it has died back, but will produce side shoots, called leek pearls that grow into identical plants for you to transplant into new beds or grow in place to table size. Seed stored in a cool dry place will remain viable for 3 years.

Garlic (*Allium sativum*)

Garlic is one of those plants that do not produce flowers, have no sexual reproduction and are referred to as clones. However, they do produce a bloom like head filled with small bulbils that you can plant either for "green garlic" or for bulbs. The first year bulbils will produce unsegmented rounders and full bulbs with cloves the second year. We use some of the bulbils in the kitchen and plant the rest for "green garlic". If you have not tried "green garlic", grow some and enjoy the treat. Plant your garlic cloves in the fall to get vigorous growth and large bulbs in the summer. If you prefer not to mess with bulbils, harvest the bloom stalks "stipes" when young and enjoy a gourmet treat.

Next month another Allium quiz, propagating bulbing onions as well as the other lesser know members of the onion family, until then you still have time to get those leek seeds started indoors for early spring planting.

till next time,

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References:

Seed to Seed, Seed Saving Techniques for the Vegetable Gardener - Suzanne Ashworth
Garden Secrets, A Guide to Understanding How Your Garden Grows and How You Can Help It Grow Even Better – Dorothy Hinshaw

There is additional information about Alliums in the kitchen and garden on my website. (www.darrolshillingburg.com/GardenSite/index.html)