

Anyone Growing Grey Shallots?

by Al Chomica



Grey shallots sound pretty boring. They are not even pretty to look at and generally they are quite small for an onion. We bought six tiny bulbs three years ago at a Saltspring Seedy Sunday for five dollars. We had never heard of them before but because we grow 13 different kinds of onions it was a perfect fit. After growing them for three years, we discovered some interesting facts that we thought to share about these grey-looking alliums. They have become our favourite onion of them all. The photo on the left shows our harvest for 2018. I'm guessing we have about 1000 bulbs now from the original six. They were planted in mid-October at the same time we planted our garlic beds. They grow over winter, making them a hands-free crop that gets watered by the winter rains. In July, the leaves start to die off and the harvest is usually at the same time as garlic in late July or early August.

The photo to the right shows are two generations of shallot. The bulb on the left is a three-year-old and the one on the right is just one year old. We discovered that this shallot likes to multiply. If that smaller shallot were planted in the ground, by next summer it would grow bigger but more importantly it will grow up to 30 more shallots that are almost the same size. Amazingly, all 30 of those new shallots would also turn into a second generation-sized onion if they were allowed to stay in the ground over summer as a perennial.

If I planted the big bulb overwinter, by next summer there would magically be at least a dozen all the same big size. There would also be a couple smaller ones that were just starting to develop into bigger bulbs but if those are plucked, cured and then planted in the fall the entire process repeats itself for a never-ending supply.



One of the original six bulbs was left in the ground as a perennial for two seasons. When dug up, there were about 100 small shallots in the clump. These were given to a market farmer who was then able to start off a large crop of these epicurean delights that sell for \$9 a pound when

mature. The two images (next page) were taken in early July at harvest time and showcase how effectively a bulb can multiply. On the left, one can see the original second-generation bulb is exposed and a bit bigger than the rest of them. When dug up, 15 big bulbs revealed themselves along with a couple of small squirts that were still growing.



Has anyone ever planted garlic or onion bulb sets in any great quantity? Last fall I planted over 500 garlic cloves and perhaps a bit more of the shallots. Bending over and inserting several hundred small bulbs into a row became a tedious back-aching chore so I decided to try an experiment. I wanted to work smarter and allow the plants natural survival strategy do the work for me. In the image on the right is a small bed where I have planted about 150 first-generation shallots. In the back half I inserted them all into the soil with their roots down but then in the front, the bulbs were literally tossed on the ground without me bending over. They were then covered over with some soil and a mulch of maple leaves and left to fend for themselves over winter. The next July both halves of this bed produced the same results. I didn't have to plant them in a conventional manner as such. To get a crop off I could just toss the bulbs on the ground and let them go. Too easy! These 150 bulbs multiplied into almost 1000 over a six-month period.



I haven't really mentioned the culinary aspects yet, but this shallot has a wonderful tear-inducing property more than most others. It is very aromatic. We use it in all sorts of dishes and in pickles as well. It does have one unique feature in that the skin turns into a hard, crisp shell that is a bit tough to cut into. We have found the best way to get the meat of the onion is to cut

the roots and stem off then make a slice down the middle just past the half way mark. The shell is then opened like a book and the bulb pops out without any further cleaning required.

One would think with a hard, protective shell that the bulb would store for a long time, but this is not the case at all. Sadly, these shallots will barely store until Christmas and they need to be consumed or replanted within the same season. We only get to eat them for a few months out of the year.



And if Grey Shallots look boring from the outside, when cut open they reveal their true colours. Far from boring, they are a bright purple inside and have an incredibly powerful onion aroma. Tricky to use in a salad because of their sharp flavour, we have created an onion gravy dish that goes well with different meats and sausage. The morel mushroom and shallot sauce we make is tasty too.

Because we have so many this year means I can experiment with them. Having done this already with garlic, our plan is to throw them in the smoker, then dehydrate them and turn them into onion powder to sprinkle on savory dishes . . .