About – Onions have been cultivated for over five thousand years. No kitchen would be considered complete without onions. Their versatility and distinctive taste are legendary in the culinary arts. Native to the Middle East and Asia, they were highly regarded by the Egyptians, so much so that they even used them for currency to pay the workers who built the pyramids. Onions were first introduced to the Western hemisphere by Christopher Columbus. He is credited with bringing them to the West Indies and from there they spread throughout the New World. Today, China is the world’s leading producer of onions followed by India and the United States. Washington is this country’s leading producer followed closely by Oregon and California.

As a vegetable category, onions are usually separated into two distinct groups: dry onions and green onions. Setting aside green onions or scallions, this discussion focuses around dry onions. Dry onions can be easily grouped into two distinct classifications- storage onions and spring/summer onions or sweet onions.

Storage onions are the typical round onions available year-around either in bags or individually. Normally grown in cooler climates, before they go to market, they are dried for a period of time resulting in a dry, brittle skin. The typical storage onions will have a stronger, more pungent flavor than their sweet counterparts. Storage onions are available in three colors: yellow, white and red. Typically, yellow onions have a stronger flavor than white and white onions are stronger than red. Spanish onions are members of the storage onion category.

Spring/summer onions are often referred to as sweet onions. What makes them so sweet is not their sugar content, but rather the lower levels of Pyruvic acid (this is the sulfur compound that gives onions their “hotness”). Sweet onions are more delicate than storage onions and must be handled with relative care. At one time, these onions were limited to spring and summer but the global popularity of sweet onions along with development of new seed varieties has made them available nearly all year long. Here are some of the more well-known varieties of sweet onions:

- **Mayan Sweets** - Originating in Peru these delicate, sweet onions are available from late September through February.
- **Maui Sweets** - This Hawaiian favorite is available April through June.
- **Texas 1015** - with a season running from mid-March through May, this is the first of the domestic sweet onions available in the spring. So named because their recommended planting date is October 15. Also available is a Mexican 1015 in late February.
- **Vidalia** - perhaps the most well-known, their peak season runs May through June. Thanks to controlled atmosphere storage, these popular onions are now available until late summer.
- **Walla Walla** - This popular Washington variety was one of the first sweet onions to burst on the scene and is available late June through August.

Selection – Onions vary greatly in size, so choose the size needed based on use- larger onions for slicing, smaller onions for stews and roasting. Look for onions that are well-shaped, free of dirt and debris, have dry skin and have no opening at the neck. Onions that are sprouting have dark spots, bruises or cuts or onions that show visible signs of mold should be avoided.

Storage – Onions should always be stored at room temperature. A dark location or one that has minimum exposure to light is preferred. Make sure they are stored in a manner that they are well-ventilated so that moisture cannot accumulate on the surface. A mesh storage container that allows the air to circulate underneath or a hanging basket will work well for storage. Never store onions near potatoes as they will absorb the moisture and ethylene gas from the onions causing them to spoil quicker.

Storage onions can be stored for longer period of time than sweet onions - perhaps as long as a month. Try to use sweet onions within a week of purchase as they are more susceptible to decay. As a general rule, the more pungent the onion, the longer it can be stored thus yellow onions will usually keep longer than a white or red onion. Once an onion has been cut, the remaining piece should be stored in an airtight container in the refrigerator, but try to use it within a couple of days to avoid potential odor contamination of other foods. Onions can be peeled, diced and frozen for later use.

Preparation and Uses – Onions are perhaps one of the most widely used ingredients in cooking today. The recipes calling for onions are endless. Raw onions, especially the sweet onion varieties, can be used to perk up a garden salad or potato salad as well as sliced or diced to top off your burger or bratwurst. Key flavor enhancers in everything from casseroles to soups, onions can be sautéed, baked, fried and roasted.

While most people enjoy the taste of onions, a great many people dread cutting them as their pungency can bring tears to one’s eyes. This reaction is caused by the gas released when the cell walls are ruptured during cutting. One method of reducing this unpleasant side-effect is to cut the onion under running water. A better and easier method is to chill the onion for an hour or so prior to cutting. This will slow the chemical reaction that produces this irritating gas.

Nutrition – Onions are a very good source of vitamin C and chromium. They are also considered a good source of vitamin B6, folate, potassium, manganese and dietary fiber. At a mere 64 calories per serving, onions contain virtually no fat, no cholesterol and no sodium.

A great deal of research has been done centered around the many ostensible health benefits of onions. Among them are the lowering of blood sugars; lowering of cholesterol levels; reducing the risk of certain forms of cancer; and aiding in cardiovascular health. Because of its anti-inflammatory properties, it may also be helpful in the treatment of conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis and asthma.