

GARDEN MUSEUM

Know your onions!

Have you ever asked yourself...

Why have I never seen an onion tree?

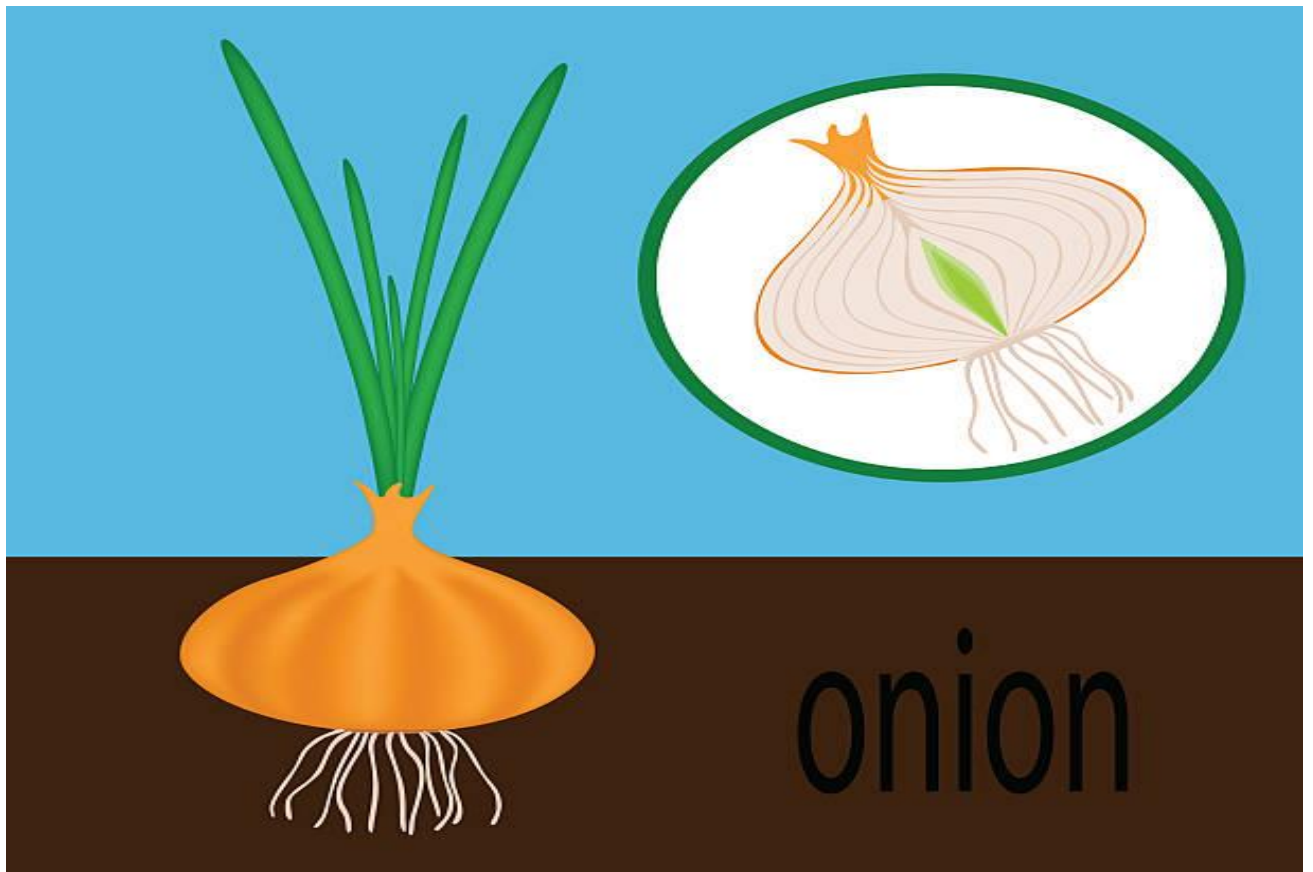
Where do onions come from?

Why do they make me cry even when I'm happy?



A slice of onion knowledge

- Onions don't grow on trees but underground like carrots and potatoes. They are bulbs which means they are made up of a short stem that produces layers of fleshy leaves known as scales which store food and water.
- The outer brown layer protects the bulb and the roots hold the bulb in the ground.



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Inside an onion



- The white scales inside are a type of leaf that stores food.
- The green leaves at the top use sunlight to make food by trapping light in a process called photosynthesis.
- New leaves grow from the stem.
- An onion bulb is edible but if you find a flower bulb in a garden such as a daffodil, hyacinth or tulip never try and eat it as they produce toxic chemicals to discourage animals from digging them up and eating them.

Where did onions come from?

- Onions are thought to have been first grown by the ancient Egyptians around 3200 BC but first originated in Central Asia and China. They are grown in many more countries now and the varieties have been developed to resist attack by pests and diseases.
- Onion fly, which looks like a small black house fly, is a major pest for onions but if you plant parsley with the onions in a field then the parsley keeps onion fly away. The onion fly produce yellow coloured maggots that love to eat the bulbs- they must like the taste of raw onions! They make the leaves turn yellow and die.
- So why do you cry when you chop onions? Well why don't you try and peel the outer brown or red paper scales, the outer layer, of an onion very carefully just using your fingers and see what happens.
- What you will find is that it is only when the fleshy bulb is cut that a chemical is released, and it is this chemical that causes your eyes to sting and water. By cutting you are damaging the cell wall which produces an enzyme which causes the production of other compounds that cause the irritation - it's a natural defence mechanism!