

## Onions – Bulbs and Green

### *Management Highlights*

- Target pH: 6.5
- Split N applications to increase N use-efficiency in onions.
- Use a B soil test or apply B annually at recommended rates to prevent deficiency in the crop.

### Yield Goals

Yield of onions is influenced by many factors beyond soil test results and fertilizer application. Cultivar selection, planting date, weather conditions, soil type and water-holding capacity, weed, insect and disease pressure and crop management practices are just a few.

*For that reason, the University of Delaware does not use yield goals in determining nutrient recommendations for vegetable crops at the present time. Instead, recommended rates are designed to produce maximum economic yields of high market quality in a good to average year.*

Growers should use these nutrient recommendations along with field history data, their knowledge of specific crop requirements, their management plans, and conditions from the current growing season to develop an appropriate fertilizer program for the crop.

### Soil pH and Liming

The target pH for onions on most Delaware soils is 6.5. Soils that are high in organic matter ("black" soils) have a lower target pH (5.6) because organic matter moderates some of the negative effects of excessive soil acidity (e.g., aluminum toxicity). The lime recommendation for a specific field is calculated from the soil pH and buffer pH measurements using the steps outlined in *Calculating the Lime Requirement – Chapter 3, Section 3.4.*

In most cases, the lime requirement can be met by either calcitic or dolomitic limestone. When soil test

Mg is less than 38 FIVs, use dolomitic limestone to prevent Mg deficiency and increase soil Mg concentrations.

### Nitrogen Management

The University of Delaware recommends a total nitrogen (N) application of **75-200 lbs N/ac** per growing season for onions. The specific rate and application recommendations are dependent upon the type of onion being grown. For most efficient N use, the total rate should be split into two or more treatments and applied according to the schedule in Table 1.

Fertilizer N rates should be reduced when planting into legume cover crops or when manure has been applied. To calculate the adjustment, see *Nitrogen Rate Adjustments – Chapter 3, Section 3.5.1.2.*

**Table 1. Nitrogen recommendations for onions.**

Application Time	Application Method	N Rate (lbs N /ac)
<b><u>Bulbs</u></b>		
At or prior to planting	Broadcast and incorporate	50 - 75
4-5 weeks after planting	Sidedressed	25 - 50
<b><u>Green onions</u></b>		
At planting	Broadcast and incorporate	50 - 75
4 - 5 weeks after planting	Sidedressed	50
3 - 4 weeks before harvest	Sidedressed	50

### Phosphorus Management

Yield-limiting phosphorus (P) deficiency is rarely a concern on Delaware soils. Long-term applications

of fertilizers and manures have resulted in P accumulations on many soils that are capable of supplying crop needs for several years with no further additions.

To determine whether P fertilization is necessary for a specific field, conduct a routine soil test. University of Delaware P recommendations for onions are dependent upon the soil test P value and the P needs of the crop. A summary of those P recommendations is given in Table 2 below.

**Table 2. Phosphorus recommendations for onions.**

Application Method and Timing	P Index Value			
	0-25	26-50	51-100	101 +
	----- lbs P <sub>2</sub> O <sub>5</sub> / ac -----			
Broadcast and disk in prior to planting	200	100	50	0

### Potassium Management

The need for potassium (K) fertilization of onions is best determined by a routine soil test. Potassium recommendations are based on the soil test K value and the K needs of the crop. A summary of University of Delaware K rates for onions is given in Table 3.

**Table 3. Potassium recommendations for onions.**

Application Method and Timing	K Index Value			
	0-25	26-50	51-100	101 +
	----- lbs K <sub>2</sub> O / ac -----			
Broadcast and disk in prior to planting	200	100	50	0

### Calcium and Magnesium Management

Calcium (Ca) and magnesium (Mg) needs of onions are usually met through routine liming. If the soil test Mg value is low (e.g., less than 38 FIVs) and liming is indicated, use dolomitic limestone to raise soil pH and increase soil Mg. If, however, liming is not necessary but Mg fertilization is still indicated, apply soluble Mg as Mg sulfate or Mg chloride to increase soil Mg. Appropriate application rates are given below in Table 4.

**Table 4. Application rates for soluble Mg as a function of Mg fertility index value.**

Mg Index Value								
0	5	10	15	20	25	30	35	40
----- lbs soluble Mg / ac -----								
80	70	60	50	40	30	20	10	0

### Boron Management

Boron (B) deficiency may occur in onions grown on Delaware soils. The best way to determine the need for B fertilization is with a soil test. Interpretation of and application rates based on the B soil test are summarized in Table 5. In the absence of a soil test, apply **1-2 lbs/ac of actual B** in a blended, broadcast fertilizer or as a soil or foliar spray. *Avoid over-application of B to prevent plant injury from B toxicity.*

**Table 5. Interpretation of the B soil test for onions.**

Soil Test Rating	Soil Concentration	Recommended Application
	--- lbs B/ac ---	--- lbs B/ac ---
Low	0.00 - 0.70	2.0
Medium	0.71 - 1.40	1.0
Optimum	> 1.40	0

### Manganese Management

Manganese (Mn) deficiency may occur in onions grown on Delaware soils, most often as a result of overliming soils that are naturally low in Mn. The University of Delaware Soil Testing Program uses an availability index based on the soil test Mn value and soil pH to predict the likelihood of Mn deficiency. That availability index is calculated using the equation:

$$MnAI = 101.7 - (15.2 \times pH) + (2.11 \times ST-Mn)$$

where:

- MNAI = Mn availability index
- pH = water pH of the soil
- ST-Mn = Mehlich 3 soil test Mn in lbs/ac.

## Commercial Vegetable Crops

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Table 3-14 in *Chapter 3, Section 3.5.5.2 (Manganese Management)* gives a summary of MNAI values for various soil pH-soil test Mn combinations. Interpretations of the Mn availability index for onions are given below in Table 6.

**Table 6. Interpretation of the Mn availability index for onions.**

MnAI Value	Interpretation
Less than 12	Mn deficiency is likely at this soil pH and Mn concentration.
12 or greater	Mn deficiency is unlikely.

Suspected Mn deficiency can be confirmed by tissue analysis. Confirmed deficiency situations can be corrected in season by foliar applications of Mn of 1 to 2 lbs/ac of actual Mn as Mn sulfate, Mn oxide or Mn chelate. If deficiency is predicted by the availability index or was observed during the previous growing season, it can be prevented by an application of 8-10 lbs/ac of actual Mn in the fertilizer band. Band applications of acid-forming fertilizer, which lower the pH in the area of plant roots, may correct Mn deficiency without the addition of Mn fertilizer.

### Other Nutrients

No other nutrients are known to be limiting to onions production in Delaware.

### Additional Information

See Soil Test Notes 1, 4, 5 and 7 (Appendix 7) and **Extension Bulletin 137: *Commercial Vegetable Production Recommendations - Delaware 2003*** (Kee et al., 2003) for additional information on nutrient management of onions.