

“Origin and History of Onions”

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ABSTRACT: The history of onion can be traced back to atleast 5000 years. None of the Monographers could indicate the places of origin of onion. It is probably a native of Asia comprising North West India, Baluchistan and Afghanistan. It probably acquired its name from the city built by ONIA in 1703 B.C. near gulf of Swez. In the oldest recorded history, onions were depicted as food in Egyptian tombs as early as 3200 B.C. It is believed that Egyptians fed them to workers for strength to build pyramids. References of onion as food were also found in Bible and Kuran. In India onion has been grown from ancient times as mentioned in a famous early medicine treatise charaka Samhita (6 B.C.). Onions were also used by the Greeks and the Romans. When the Romans introduced the onion in Europe it quickly became a popular vegetable. Despite protracted social and religious taboos through the centuries, the onion has gradually regained respectability. Today Onion continue to be an important part of our diet. Onion is an important horticultural commodities grown worldwide for their culinary purposes and medicinal values. Area under onion production worldwide is 3 millions hectare with production of 55 million tonnes. U.S. is the largest producer of onions, followed by Japan, Spain and Egypt. India is the second largest producer of onion after China. Area under onion in India is 5.3 lakh hectares with a total production value of 55 lakh tonnes respectively. Onions are grown almost all over India. Maharashtra ranks top in onion production. Other major onion growing states in the country are Gujarat, Orissa, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh. Onion represents the only item amongst fruits and vegetables where Indian figures are prominent than the world’s production and export.

Keywords:- Onion, Varieties, cultivated, species, growing, cultivars.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Onion (*Allium cepa*) which is also called a bulb onion, common onion and garden onion is the most widely cultivated species of the genus *Allium*. The plants name comes from the Latin *Unio* or *annianus* and is associated with the welsh *einion*, meaning “anvil”. The Late Latin name *Unio* was used to describe a species of onion resembling a single white pearl. This was later formed into the basis for the French, “oignon” and then later the English, “Onion”.

II. ONION HISTORY

The history of the onion is an interesting story. It’s impossible to know exactly when they first popped up on the culinary scene; most historians agree that they have been domesticated and cultivated for at least 6000 years, possibly longer. They were likely a prehistoric dietary staple for our hunter – gatherer ancestor. Onions are mentioned on ancient Babylonian tablets in recipe form dating all the way back to 1700-1600 BC. They have been used throughout history for a variety of purposes, primarily in cooking.

Modern archeologist, botanist and historians are unable to determine exact time and place of their first cultivations (because this vegetable is perishable and its cultivation leaves little to no trace) however some written records enables us to point a very interesting picture about its origins. There are two schools of thoughts regarding the home of onion cultivation, and both look at the period 5500 years ago in Asia. Some scientists believe that onion was first domesticated in central Asia and others in Middle East by Babylonian culture in Iran and west Pakistan.

Onions grew in chinese gardens as early as 5000 years ago and they are referenced in some of the oldest Vedic writings from India. In Egypt onions can be traced back to 3500 B.C. Ancient Sumerians widely grew and cooked onions 4000 years ago the plant has been discovered at the royal palace at Knossos in crete (Estes. 2000).

The onion became more than just food after arriving in Egypt. The ancient Egyptians worshipped the onion, believing that its spherical shape and concentric ring symbolized eternity. Of all the vegetables, that had their images created from precious metals by Egyptian artists, only the onion was made out of gold (Rogers,

1995). Paintings of onions appear on the inner walls of the pyramids and in the tombs of both the old Kingdom and the New Kingdom. The onion is mentioned as a funeral offering and depicted on the banquet tables of the great feasts – both large, peeled onions and slender immature ones. They were shown upon the altars of the gods. Frequently, Egyptian priests are pictured holding onions in his hand or covering an altar with a bundle of their leaves or roots. In mummies, onions have frequently been found in the pelvic regions of the body, in the thorax, flattened against the ears, and in front of the collapsed eyes. Flowering onions have been found on the chest and onions have been found attached to the soles of the feet and along the legs. King Ramses IV, who died in 1160 B.C. was entombed with onions in his eye sockets. Some Egyptologist theorize that onions may have been used because it was believed that their strong scent and / or magical powers would prompt the dead to breathe again. Other Egyptologists believe it was because onions were known for their strong antiseptic qualities, which construed as magical, would be handy in the afterlife.

Because onions were a cheap source of food, Egyptian slave laborers, those who constructed the pyramids consumed then on a daily basis (Platt, 2003). In addition, they were depicted in the funerary paintings in tombs and even placed on and around mummies (Platt, 2003). In Pompeii, remains of an onion basket were discovered in a brothel – apparently, back then they were thought to encourage “Carnal desire”.

With all that popularity Onion became more and more present in the written records of human history in 1st millennia B.C. and early centuries of A.D. It was described several times by the Israelites in the Bible, celebrated by the Indian medical treatise charaka Sanhita as one of the most important remedies for various heart, joint, digestion illnesses.

Likewise, Dioscorides, a Greek physician in first century A.D., noted several medicinal uses of onions. The Greeks used onions to fortify athletes for Olympic games. Before competition athletes would consume pounds of onions, drink onion juice and rub onions on their bodies.

Additionally, the ancient Greek physician Hippocrates wrote in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. that a broad variety of onions were eaten regularly in Greece (Estes, 2000). In ancient India, however there was a fair amount of revulsion to onions. Orthodox Brahmins, Hindu Widows, Buddhists and Jains regarded onions as forbidden vegetables because of their strong odor and stimulating action (Jones and Mann, 1963).

After Rome conquered Greece, the onion became a staple in the Roman diet. Onions have a long medicinal history. Ancient Roman naturalist Pliny the Elder believed that they healed sores, vision problems, toothaches and dysentery. Gladiators were massaged with onion juice before walking into the arena believing it promoted strength. In 6th Century India, onions were deemed helpful for the heart, joints and indigestion. In Elizabethan times onions were used to soothe blisters and hemorrhoids.

It was the Romans who introduced the onion family to Europe. The Romans ate onions regularly and carried them on journeys to their provinces in England and Germany. Pliny the Elder, Roman’s observer wrote of Pompeii’s onions and cabbages. Before he was overcome and killed by the volcano’s heat and fumes, he catalogued the Roman beliefs about the efficacy of the onion to cure vision, induce sleep, heal mouth sores, dog bites, toothaches, dysentery and lumbago. Excavators of the doomed city would later find gardens where, just as Pliny had said, onions had grown. The bulbs had left behind telltale cavities in the ground. The Roman gourmet Apicius, credited with writing one of the first cookbooks (which dates to the eighth and ninth centuries A.D.) included many references to onions.

After the fall of the Roman Empire, Europe entered into Dark and Middle ages where main sources of food for entire population were beans, cabbage and onions. During that time, onions was heavily used as both food and medicinal remedy and was often more valuable than money. With the arrival of Renaissance and the New trade routes of the Golden Age of Sail, onions were carried to all four corners of the world enabling European colonist and native people from new found continents to grow this incredible vegetable on countless soil types.

During the fourth century B.C. Alexander the Great transported onions from Egypt to Greece, where they spread to other parts of Europe following Alexander’s conquests (Platt, 2003). For centuries thereafter, Europeans cultivated onions, which became especially popular in cooking in places such as present day Germany at the start of the Middle Ages (Jones and Mann, 1963). By the fifteenth century, Europeans began introducing different cultivars and landraces to parts of the New World. Christopher Columbus crews planted onions in Hispaniola as early as 1494 and the Vegetable was mentioned as cultivated in the present day United States as early as 1629. By the nineteenth century, various types of onion were growing all across the US (Estes, 2000).

The first Pilgrims brought onions with them on the Mayflower. However they found that strains of wild onions already grew throughout North America. Native American Indian used wild onions in a variety of ways eating them raw or cooked as a seasoning or as a vegetable. Such onions were also used in syrups, as poultices, as an ingredient in dyes and even as toys. According to diaries of colonist, bulb onions were planted as soon as the Pilgrim farmers could clear the land in 1648,

During World War II the Russian soldiers were so taken with onions ability to prevent infection, that they applied onions to battle wounds as an antiseptic. And through the ages, there have been countless folk remedies that have ascribed their curative powers to onions such as putting a sliced onion under your pillow to fight off insomnia.

Generally speaking, those varieties of onion adopted to Northern Europe were introduced to New England and the mid – Atlantic region, and those grown in Southern Europe were brought to Southern states. Some of the Northern Landraces include Red. Witherfield, bred in the connecticut River valley around 1800 and Southport Yellow Globe, developed prior to 1835 in and around southport, connecticut. Southern varieties include white portugal (or silverskin), an old European variety grown in North America before 1800 and Bermuda, a variety that originated in Italy and was first grown in Southern Taxes in the late – 1800’s (Onions and other Allium Plants – Encyclopedia of food and culture, 2003).

As onions expended into other areas of the world, they continued to be more than just food. Onions, valued as both medicine and food. Onions are now grown worldwide in many varieties, sizes and flavours and they have gained a permanent place in our present day Kitchen both raw and cooked.

III. FOLKLORE

- The pungent odor and awesome strength of the onion was a mystery to ancient man. An old Turkish legend explain it rather profoundly. It tells that when Satan was thrown out of heaven, garlic sprouted where he first placed his left foot and onions grew where he placed his right foot.
- When plague raged throughout Eastern Europe, people thought it was caused by evil spirit and they used onions and garlic as good luck charms to chase off those spirits.
- People hung strands of onions and garlic from their dooways, their windows and even around their necks to keep the vampires away.

IV. CONCLUSION

Onions are one of the most ancient food sources on the planet. Since the beginning of civilization, onions have been an important part of our diet. Once believed to be a lowly vegetable because of its pungent taste, the onion has emerged as a favorite ingredient in many recipes.

Onion is an important and indispensable item and can be found is almost every kitchen around the world. It is popularly used at both immature and mature bulb stages as vegetable and as spice. Onion is one of the few vegetables which can be kept for long period of time and can safely withstand the hazards of rough handling. It is being used as salad and pickle. To some extent it is used by processing industry for dehydration in the form of onion slice and powder. Onion and other allium species are highly valued herbs possessing a lot of culinary and medicinal values. Some of their beneficial properties can be seen after long term usage.

Onion is useful for the prevention of cardiovascular disease, especially since it diminishes the risk of blood clots. Onion protects against certain infections and stomach cancer. Onion improves lung function, especially in asthmatics. The more pungent varieties of onion appear to possess the greatest concentration of health promoting phytochemicals.

Today, onions continue to be an important part of our diet. The National Cancer Institute has reported that onions contain antioxidants that help to block cancer and appear to lower Cholesterol. Apparently our ancestors weren’t too far off in believing that the onion is much more than a lowly vegetable.

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