

by: Dave Long, UCCE Master Gardener of Lake Tahoe

*This is the second part in a phenology series on onions. Tahoe/Truckee is a little too far north and a bit too cold for the short day sweet onions, but sweet onions are big business in the southern states, and are key specialty crops in a variety of areas.*

## **The Bermuda Onion - Progenitor of America's Sweet Onion**

What began with the Wethersfield Large Red was just the start of the onion industry in the United States. The interest in the short day Bermuda Onion, a milder and sweeter yellow or white onion coincided with the drop in production of the Wethersfield Red, and a change in the palates of Americans away from the more crisp and pungent onions and towards a less pungent, sweeter onion. The sweet onions typically have higher moisture content and lower sulfur percentages than most onion types. The Bermuda Onion (and all sweet onions) benefited from better and faster shipping methods which compensated for the short storage times of the higher water content sweet onions. Some derivation of the Bermuda Onion had been grown on the Bermuda Islands since the 1600's, though as a local garden crop. Inexplicitly the seeds were always imported from the Canary Islands, which was the ultimate demise of the long term commercial viability of this onion. Clearly the Bermuda Onion had its own cache' during its time in the sun, with Mark Twain waxing elegantly over both the onion's taste and the locale. It is claimed that Ernest Hemingway, met Gregorio Fuentes, the inspiration for the main character in the Old Man and the Sea while Hemingway was headed to a Havana vegetable vendor looking to buy his beloved Bermuda Onion. During the height of this onion's popularity at the end of the 19th century the steamer SS Trinidad was bringing 30,000 twenty pound boxes of Bermuda Onions to the US each week. Trade with the US nearly stopped during WWI, and a blight to the seed crop in the Canary Islands reduced the Bermuda Onion to a specialty crop. But Americans love of the onion was just starting, and Texas was to play a big role in modern onion cultivation.



Photo credit Texas Agrilife.

The influence of Texas on the American love affair with the onion, actually starts in 1889 Del Mar, California when the Del Mar Hotel, owned by "Colonel" Jacob Taylor burnt to the ground. Taylor an early developer of Del Mar packed what little he had and set out to develop a farming community in Demmit County in south Texas. Part of the development's attraction was the proposal to grow strawberries and onions - both crops being transplanted from California. By 1899 Taylor had started construction of a dam on the Nueces River. With water for irrigation and cheap land, many small farming operations settled in the area. In

an effort to capitalize on the then popularity of the Bermuda Onion, Taylor arranged for the same Canary Island onion seed used for Bermuda Onions to be delivered to area farmers. While the

onion was a success the strawberries were not. To further the marketing of the onions from Demmit County the Taylor development became the Bermuda Colony and eventually Bermuda, Texas. By 1917, in part due to limitations in shipping from Bermuda because of WWI, Bermuda Texas was shipping 7000 rail cars (20-40 tons/car) per year of the Texas Bermuda Onion. Following WWI as onion prices dropped dramatically and the reliability of the Canary Island seed became problematic the town of Bermuda was no more. Texas sweet onions however were just coming into their own.

To address the increasingly Canary Island onion seed shortage, farmers looked for other sources, eventually finding a Spanish short day onion that worked well in the south Texas areas. By trial and error (and terroir) and with the help of agricultural experts from Texas A&M. A true Texas sweet onion, the Texas Grano was developed, with seed and onion both grown in Texas. The Texas Grano's ancestry includes some traits of the Bermuda onion that the Spanish onion was crossed with. The University's involvement was the result of the Roosevelt administration's push to improve farm prices through development of more viable local crops during the early years of the Great Depression. The Texas A&M program gave rise to a variety of sweet onion types including Texas Early Grano 502 and the famous Texas Granex. Today onions are the largest cash crop grown in Texas. The Texas developed onions are the basis for many other sweet onion varieties. The Vidalia of Georgia is one derivation (according to Texas onion history), arising in 1952 when a Georgia farmer purchased and planted Texas Granex onion starts (small seedlings that are transplanted to the fields) in an effort to keep the weeds from overgrowing his onions. The story of the Vidalia onion as told in Georgia history is a bit different with no mention of a Texas source and moving back the discovery of the Vidalia onion to 1932, a year before the Texas Grano 502 was introduced. In any event the resulting bumper crop of Georgia onions were much sweeter than any comparable local onion and with the help of other area farmers, the Georgia Legislature, Federal regulations and farmer cooperatives the Vidalia Onion, the state of Georgia's official state vegetable, can only be grown in a twenty county area of Georgia. The onion crop is the most lucrative crop in Georgia, surpassing peanuts, pecans and peaches.

The famous Maui Sweet Onion also has a Texas connection in reportedly being of Texas Granex origin, though most Maui Onion marketers do not mention this aspect. The true Maui Onion is a US trademarked variety, grown on only 400 acres of rich red volcanic earth of the upland slopes of Mt. Haleakala and grown by the Maui Growers Co-op.

There are a variety of regional short day sweet onions which have Texas ancestry, including The Imperial County (California) Sweet Onion, which is grown not too far distant from "Colonel" Jacob Taylor's Del Mar.

One "sweet onion" that does not have a Texas connection is the Walla Walla Sweet Onion. The Walla Walla is an intermediate day onion having yellow skins (scales) and white flesh, grown only in southwestern Washington and is a trademarked variety, so while you can buy Walla Walla onions, Walla Walla onion seeds, or Walla Walla onion starts you cannot actually call the resulting mature onions Walla Walla unless they were grown in a specific area of Washington State. Its origin is well documented being brought as seed from the Mediterranean Island of

Corsica by a former French soldier named Peter Pieri around 1900. The Walla Walla Onion is Washington State's designated vegetable.

More traditional onion types (not sweet onions) have recently gained in popularity, benefitting from various growing regions promoting specific types but also from their original attributes of longer storage and a complex of flavors that are evident when eaten fresh, sautéed, caramelized, boiled or fried.

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