

Why Some Onions Are “Too Hot” — And How to Grow Milder Ones



Onion “heat” — that sharp bite that makes your eyes water and your mouth say WHOA — comes from **sulfur compounds**. All onions have them, but how intense they become depends on:

1. **The variety you choose**
2. **How they’re grown**
3. **The soil they’re grown in**
4. **How much water they receive**
5. **When they’re harvested and how they’re stored**

Let’s break it down.



1. Some Onion Varieties Are Naturally Hotter

This is the #1 reason.

Mild / Sweet Varieties:

- Ailsa Craig
- Candy
- Walla Walla
- Sweet Spanish
- Vidalia (if grown in the right soils)

These have **lower sulfur content** and more natural sugars.

Hot / Sharp Storage Varieties:

- Patterson
- Copra
- Red Wing
- Stuttgarter
- Yellow Globe types

These are bred to store for months — ***and storage onions are always hotter.***

It's part of what makes them good keepers.

If you want sweet onions, choose sweet varieties.

You *cannot* make a naturally hot storage onion sweet, no matter how lovingly you treat it.



2. Water = Sweetness (Low Water = Heat)

Onions that experience **water stress** get hotter.

Here's why:

- When onions dry out, sulfur compounds concentrate.
- Less water = more pungency.
- Consistent moisture = milder, sweeter bulbs.

Tip:

Water **consistently** during bulb formation (late April–June in Zone 6b).

Aim for 1" of water per week — more in hot spells.

But don't overwater right before harvest, or bulbs may split.



3. Soil Sulfur Levels Matter

If your soil naturally has **high sulfur**, your onions *will* be hotter.

The high-country typically has pretty balanced soils, but if someone is using:

- Sulfur-based fertilizers
- Organic amendments like some composted manures
- Acidifying agents (like aluminum sulfate)

...your onions may crank up the heat.

Tip:

Avoid sulfur-heavy fertilizers for mild onions.

Use compost + balanced organic fertilizer instead.



4. Heat Stress Increases Onion Heat

Onions that get hit with:

- High heat early
- Sudden temperature swings
- Not enough water during heat events
- Strong sun during bulbing

...tend to get spicier.

Tip:

Mulch your onion beds to regulate temperature and moisture. Straw works beautifully.



5. Harvest Timing Affects Flavor Too

Under-mature onions = harsher flavor.

Sweet onions develop sweetness late in the growing cycle.

If they're harvested early (before the tops fall naturally), they'll taste stronger.

Tip:

Wait until 50–80% of the tops fall over naturally before harvesting sweet onions.



6. Storage Makes Onions Hotter Over Time

Sweet onions **do NOT store well** — and the longer they sit, the stronger they get.

Storage onions (like Patterson or Red Wing) get **milder** over the first few weeks of curing...
...but *sweet onions* get *hotter* the longer they sit.

Tip:

- Eat sweet onions fresh.
- Store storage onions for winter.
- Don't mix them up!

HOW TO GROW THE MILDEST ONIONS POSSIBLE

Here's your quick cheat sheet:

 **Choose naturally sweet varieties**

(Candy, Walla Walla, Ailsa Craig, Sweet Spanish)

 **Keep soil consistently moist during bulb formation**

(Do NOT let onions dry out!)

 **Use mulch to regulate heat and moisture**

Straw is ideal — avoid hot black plastic coverings for sweet onions.

 **Avoid sulfur-based fertilizers**

Use compost + balanced organic fertilizer (like 5-5-5 or similar).

 **Harvest at full maturity**

Let tops fall over naturally.

 **Eat sweet onions fresh**

They do not cure well and get hotter with time.

 **Store hot/storage varieties separately**

They're meant to last — and actually *taste better* after curing.

In Summary...

Hot onions aren't your fault!

They're usually a combination of:

- Variety
- Watering
- Soil sulfur
- Heat stress
- Harvest timing
- Storage length

Choose the right type + keep them well-watered, and you'll get big, sweet, beautiful onions your neighbors will rave about.