Plant onions early in the growing season

With the sub-freezing temperatures and negative degree windchills over the last couple of weeks, gardening has been the last thing on people’s minds. However, once those temps start to rise, it’ll be time to plant bare-root transplants, container-grown transplants or sets.

When choosing a location to plant onions, select an area with loose, fertile soil that is well drained. Onions have shallow roots and require constant moisture. Oklahoma isn’t known for abundant rainfall, so gardeners will need to apply about an inch of water per week in order to produce a good bulb.

Gardeners will need to take special care when cultivating their plants due to shallow roots. The root system easily can be damaged if not careful.

As with most plants, onions tend to grow better in soil that is rich in nutrients. One method of fertilizing onions is to apply and work in a pound of rotted manure for each square foot of soil before planting. Gardeners also should mix in about a quart and a half of 10-20-10 per 100 square feet of garden space.

Gardeners also can consider a different fertilization plan, which is to fertilize the plants twice – once when they’re about 6 inches tall, and again when they’re about a foot tall. Scatter a 4-inch-wide band of 10-20-10 along each side of the row at a rate of 3 ounces per 20 feet of row.

When it comes to growing onions, gardeners have three options:

1. Start the transplants in a high tunnel or greenhouse.
2. Purchase bare-root plants that are ready for transplanting into the soil.
3. Grow from sets.

No matter which method gardeners choose, when the plants are ready to get put into the ground, plant them 3 to 4 inches apart and about 2 inches deep to produce good bulbs.

These primarily are for producing what we know as green onions, but often will produce reasonably sized bulbs. The nature of the onion is to grow tips in cool weather and form bulbs as the days begin to get longer.

The timing of bulbing mainly is controlled by day length. The vernal equinox, or 12 hours of daylight, is March 20 this year. Gardeners need to prepare now and get those onions in the ground as soon as possible in order for the plants to have time to develop good tops and root systems before bulbing begins.