

**PENNY SAVER NEWS**

FAX: 932-5261

January 14, 2005

BY: Mary A. Keith, Ph.D., L.D.  
Food, Nutrition and Health Agent**HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY**

5339 S. County Road 579

Seffner, FL 33584-3334

PH:(813)744-5519 x 136, FAX:744-5776  
e-mail:makeith@mail.ifas.ufl.edu

## Tears of Joy over Onions?

Yes, yes, we all know that vegetables are good for us, but do onions really count as vegetables? You bet! And did you know that some onions are better than others? It's true, and the best are probably not the ones you expected. What kinds of dry onions do you recognize? There are red, white, yellow, and sweet ones like the Vidalia. We'll skip the little green ones for now.

Even though they are not dark green or yellow inside like some of the best veggies, onions do provide a surprising amount of protective phytonutrients. While there are hundreds of different individual phytonutrient compounds, as a group they are recognized as being able to protect us against cancer, to improve how our lungs work, help us resist bacteria and viruses, and may even help lower our cholesterol levels. Is all of that worth some bad breath?

The interesting thing is that neither the ones with the most color (reds) nor with the least (white) have as much of the good stuff as the ones in the middle, the yellows. It seems that white onions don't produce much of the protective stuff to begin with. The red ones make more color than protection. And yellow cooking onions produce plenty of two major groups of protective compounds. Sweet onions are also yellow, but there is more difference than just sugar between a cooking and a sweet onion.

Unfortunately the protective compounds also come with the side effect of lots of smell. The pungent yellow onions are the ones most likely to make us cry. Since many people don't appreciate crying over their meals, it is not surprising that the 'sweet'

onions have gotten so popular. Ones like Vidalias for example don't have the punch to make us cry. Unfortunately they also don't have nearly as much of the protective compounds as cooking onions do. And shallots, the small onions that are so strong they can only be eaten cooked, have the most of all.

But calling a mild onion 'sweet' is not entirely correct. 'Sweet' onions actually have less sugar than 'hot' yellow onions. What they don't have are the sulfur compounds that make us cry. Instead of more sugar, they have a lot more water than their yellow relatives. We would be more accurate calling them dilute mild onions, because that is why they taste sweet, not because they have any extra sugar.

That helps explain why sweet onions are often very disappointing when they are cooked. Because they have less sugar, they don't turn brown and sweet like a yellow onion. And since they have so much water, they generally go limp and mushy in a frying pan. If you want a really good French onion soup, buy a bag of yellow cooking onions. Put up with the tears for the moment, but you will enjoy a much more flavorful bowl of soup at the end.

Put up with the tears in your cooking now and you may enjoy a longer, healthier life. For the most protection it seems that yellow pungent onions grown in cooler parts of the country provide more help than those grown in warmer areas. If you happen to notice that bags of onions in the store are labeled with where they were grown, the further north the source, the more likely you are to get the most protection for your money.

If the only way you like your onions is a deep-fried onion blossom, the oil and breading are probably having a bigger effect on your health than the onion inside.

Here's a recipe for a baked onion bloom. Select a healthy dip to go with this, and enjoy

good health for years to come. Rubbing the rosemary between the palms of your hands as you sprinkle it on the onion will release more flavor. If you prefer other herbs, feel free to use them instead of these.

### Herb-Baked Onion Flower

1 large onion

2 tsp olive oil

1 tsp dried thyme or oregano

½ tsp dried rosemary

Cut about half an inch off the top of the onion and peel off the skin. Make 6-8 vertical cuts across the onion. Cut down to within about half an inch of the bottom, so that the base stays together. Set the onion on a large sheet of aluminum foil. Drizzle the oil over the top, then sprinkle on the herbs. Pull the foil up around the sides to wrap it and pinch edges together tightly. Place on baking pan or dish and bake at 425° F for thirty minutes. Onion should be tender and cooked but still firm enough to stand up and hold the shape of the wedges. Serve warm. Serves 2.

Adapted from Environmental Nutrition

*Hillsborough County Extension is a cooperative service of the Hillsborough County Board of County Commissioners and the University of Florida.*

The Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences is an Equal Employment Opportunity - Affirmative Action Employer authorized to provide research, educational information and other services only to individuals and institutions that function without regard to race, color, sex, age, handicap or national origin. COOPERATIVE EXTENSION IN AGRICULTURE, HOME ECONOMICS, STATE OF FLORIDA, IFAS, UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA, U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE, AND BOARDS OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS COOPERATING