

# Nodding Onion

*Allium cernuum*

The most notable feature of Nodding Onion is its unique ball of star-like flowers which “nod” downward on a bent stem (about 1 ½ feet high). Blooming in July or August, the flowers last 3-4 weeks and range in color from lavender to pink, sometimes white. Each ball (umbel) is about 1½–2 inches across, consisting of 40-60 quarter-inch flowers.



The nodding umbels of flowers are thought to be an adaptation that tends to restrict insect visitors to bees. Other insects are more reluctant to hang upside-down to feed on nectar or pollen. The nodding habit may also protect the nectar from rain.

Once pollinated, the flowers turn upright and ripen into papery 3-lobed capsules which release shining black seeds at maturity. The soft, grass-like leaves are shorter than the flower stem and bluish-green in color. The root system consists of elongated bulbs that often form clusters.

A perennial in the Lily family, Nodding Onion is a native of North America from Alaska across Canada, south through the Rocky Mountains to Mexico. It is found along coastal bluffs at low altitudes, and in moist areas on ledges and slopes at high altitudes. In the Midwest, much of the prairie habitat where this plant once occurred has been replaced by development.

The City of Chicago got its name from the Algonquin name for this plant: “chigagou.” The name was first recorded in a 1688 French document referring to a meadow full of Nodding onion along the river near the first settlement. The name was subsequently given to the river and finally to the city in 1830.

Nodding onion is recognized by pollination ecologists as having special value for our native bees. The plant also attracts honeybees, butterflies and hummingbirds. Other insects/larvae feed on the leaves and bulbs, and the bulbs are eaten by bear and ground squirrels. Elk and deer may graze on its early spring sprouts, but otherwise avoid this plant.

For the gardener, a nice characteristic of the Nodding Onion is its adaptability. While it prefers part sun and moist conditions, it will grow in almost any situation --full sun to deep shade-- in loam, sand, clay, or shallow, rocky soil. You may tuck a handful of Nodding onion among rocks, nestle some against a tree, or allow it to spread as a ground cover.

Nodding onion readily reseeds. If this is not desired, deadhead when the flowers fade. It is, however, easier to establish new plants by transplanting the bulbs than by seeding. Divide Nodding onion when 8-10 bulbs appear in the clump. This plant tolerates drought and black walnut.

## **For more information and photos:**

[http://www.illinoiswildflowers.info/prairie/plantx/nod\\_onionx.htm](http://www.illinoiswildflowers.info/prairie/plantx/nod_onionx.htm)

<http://plants.usda.gov/core/profile?symbol=ALCE2>

[http://www.wildflower.org/plants/result.php?id\\_plant=ALCE2](http://www.wildflower.org/plants/result.php?id_plant=ALCE2)