Let $G$ be a simple algebraic group over an algebraically closed field of arbitrary characteristic $p$. A closed subgroup $X$ is $G$-irreducible if it is not contained in any proper parabolic subgroup of $G$. A problem of considerable interest is to classify the $G$-irreducible subgroups. We solve the problem when $G$ is an algebraic group of exceptional type and $X$ is a subgroup of type $A_1$. To solve this problem we first embed $X$ in a maximal proper closed connected subgroup $M$ of $G$. These groups have been classified by Liebeck and Seitz. If $X$ is $G$-irreducible, then $X$ is $M$-irreducible. The converse is true in most cases. We determine all exceptions. (Received September 28, 2004)