

Home & Garden Education Center



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EXTENSION

Eggplants are Egg-cellent!

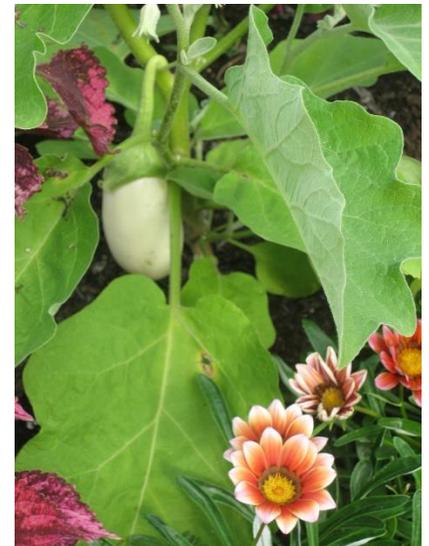
By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

I started growing eggplant because it was such a beautiful looking vegetable. Those large, dark purple, shiny orbs feel so soft and smooth that I just had to add some eggplants to the garden. Eggplants (*Solanum melongena*) are in the Solanaceae family along with tomatoes, peppers and potatoes. If you have had luck growing the latter, eggplants should also do well.

Plants may have originated in India but they were grown throughout southern and eastern Asia. Eggplants made their way to northern Africa and the Mediterranean region, eventually reaching England around 1600. It was English speakers who coined the name 'eggplant', which originally referred to the white fruited types that resembled chicken eggs. To others, eggplants are known as aubergine or brinjal.

Eggplants are warm season vegetables. They love those 80 to 90°F days and are not happy when night temperatures dip below 60°F. They are typically set in the garden as transplants either purchased or started from seeds planted indoors about 10 weeks before planting out. A mistake often made by novice eggplant growers is transplanting the young seedlings into the garden before the weather has reliably warmed. This cold start can stunt their growth and productivity.

Easter Egg eggplant image by D. Pettinelli



Like most vegetables, eggplants enjoy a sunny site and a well-drained soil with a pH in the mid 6's. Plants need consistent watering or may develop blossom end rot, just like tomatoes and peppers. Avoid overwatering or poorly drained sites as plants are susceptible to Verticillium wilt.

Since eggplants produce from about midsummer until cool weather sets in, they require a fair amount of nutrients just like other long season crops. Fertilize as directed by a soil test or, without a soil test, according to the directions on a fertilizer package before planting. Then, when first fruit form, sidedress plants with a low nitrogen fertilizer. Too much nitrogen encourages lush green leafy growth at the expense of flowers and fruit.

Depending on the cultivar, the plants may grow from 18 inches to 4 feet tall. Consider either staking or placing tomato cages over the taller plants. Laden with fruit, they can topple over during late summer rainstorms. Eggplants produce suckers, like tomatoes. Often the bud below the first flower cluster is left to grow for a double stemmed plant. Tops can also be pinched to encourage more branching.

Eggplants, especially the smaller ones, are eminently suited to being grown in containers. Use any pot or other container at least the size of a 5-gallon bucket. Obviously, make sure there are drainage holes. Use a commercial soilless potting mix to reduce problems with diseases. Eggplants are self-fertile so even if you just grow one, it will set fruit (botanically, eggplants are considered a berry).

The eggplants in my garden do not seem to have many pest problems. The two biggest are that something ate the first set of eggplants I planted (rabbit I suspect) and flea beetles. These tiny beetles eat holes in the large, coarsely lobed leaves. Larger, vigorous transplants can usually outgrow the damage but one might want to use row covers over tender seedlings if flea beetles are persistent. Growing plants in containers often circumvents flea beetle damage when containers are placed on tables or benches, away from the beetles.

Harvest eggplants when they have grown to their mature size and when a finger pressed into the skin causes it to give slightly but then go back to normal. Unlike tomatoes, eggplants cannot simply be plucked from the plant. You might end up pulling the plant out of the ground. Use scissors or a knife when harvesting. Fruit that is left on the plant too long will become seedy and bitter so harvest once or twice a week when the eggplants start to ripen.

Eggplants can be stored in a cool room or in the refrigerator but should be cooked within a few days from picking. I like the little ones split, brushed with olive oil and herbs and grilled for about 5 minutes. Larger varieties can be used for moussaka, eggplant parmesan or baba ghanouj.

The hardest thing about growing eggplant is deciding on which variety to grow. Fruits range in size from a few inches to almost a foot long. Colors go from deep purple to lavender, rose to white and even green and striped. 'Rosa Bianca' is a favorite of mine with its 6-inch light purple fruits but after the rabbits ate it, I had to settle for 'Fairy Tale' and 'Little Finger' both of which are perfect for grilling. For large purple fruit, you can try 'Black Beauty'. The long and narrow 'Orient Express' is probably the most reliable producer and tolerates cooler weather quite well.

Eggplant Fairy Tale & Little Finger image by D. Pettinelli



Dare to try a few eggplants in your garden. Check out local farmers markets for unusual eggplant varieties this summer and cook them up. Note the ones you find most appealing and seek them out for next year's garden. For more information about growing eggplants or for other garden related queries, call the UConn Home & Garden Education Center (toll-free) at (877) 486-6271, visit www.ladybug.uconn.edu or get in touch with your local Cooperative Extension Center.