

Eggplant in the Garden

By Margaret Murphy, Horticulture Outreach Specialist

Eggplants are ready for harvest! I have already eaten my first of the season and it tasted delicious! The cultivation of eggplant is thought to have originated in India domesticated from a wild form. This nightshade has a colorful history. Folks in medieval times believed it to have properties of a love potion. In later years, the eggplant was held with suspicion as it was thought to cause madness.

The first varieties grown were not the familiar purple eggplant so commonly seen today but rather produced a small, egg-shaped fruit – hence the name eggplant. Today, the fruit of eggplants comes in many different shapes, sizes and colors. You can select cultivars with fruit that is long and thin, pear-shaped, globular, or small and oval. Fruit colors include white, deep purple, brown, green, pink, and striped. Certain varieties have become favorites based on the type of cooking one is doing. Long, narrow eggplant is often used in stir-fries as it holds its shape and texture better. The larger round or pear-shaped varieties absorb flavors well so are commonly used in dishes with sauces.

Growing eggplant is not difficult. The plant prefers full sun and well-drained soil. Like tomatoes and peppers, transplant eggplant outdoors when the danger of frost has past. If you are starting seeds indoors, begin 6 to 8 weeks before seedlings will be transplanted outside. Eggplant likes it warm and will thrive in heat. It is less hardy than its relative the tomato and does not tolerate cool nighttime temperatures. So, for best results with fruiting, transplant outside when overnight temperatures are consistently above 50 degrees F. Also, keep eggplant evenly watered. Consistent moisture can help prevent the fruit from becoming bitter.

Harvest ripe fruit for the best flavor. Size is not always an indication of maturity as it will vary by cultivar. Fruit that is ready to be picked should have firm and shiny skin. A gardener's rule of thumb is to press the skin with your thumb, if it's ripe, the skin will spring back. If it's too firm with no give, leave the fruit on the vine for a while longer. If the thumb imprint remains, then the fruit is over mature. When harvesting, cut the stem with a sharp knife or pruners. Leave a bit of the stem and the calyx (or cap) attached to the fruit. With some cultivars the stem and calyx have thorns so harvest these types wearing gloves. Regular harvesting will encourage continued fruiting.

There are numerous cultivars available to try. Several purple varieties include 'Black Beauty', 'Black Bell II', and 'Dusky'. All of these produce large, oval or pear-shaped fruit. White varieties include the cylindrical-shaped 'Caspar', and oval-shaped 'Ghostbuster'. For a pop of pink try the 'Rosita' cultivar. This bears rose pink, teardrop-shaped fruit. Eggplant with compact growth habits suitable for small spaces or containers include 'Pinstripe', which produces round, lavender fruit with white streaks; 'Ivory', which has white, egg-sized fruit; and 'Ophelia', with small-sized purple fruit.

Eggplant can encounter a few problems. Colorado potato beetles can attack the plant. Diseases and disorders common to tomatoes and pepper can also affect eggplant such as early blight or blossom end rot.

I get mixed reactions when I mention that eggplant is one of my favorite vegetables. People either like it or want nothing to do with it. I suspect some folks in the latter category have never actually tried eggplant. I encourage them to do so, if they haven't. It is one of the most versatile vegetables around. It can be baked, steamed, grilled, boiled sautéed, breaded and stuffed. I put it in quiche, casseroles and my preferred meal of choice, eggplant parmesan.

Eggplant does not store well so it's best to harvest right before you plan to cook it. If need be, it can be stored in the refrigerator for a few days in plastic wrap or a plastic baggie.

###