



William T. Kemper Center for Home Gardening

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Eggplant

Eggplant (*Solanum melongena* var. *esculentum*) is a relative of the tomato, potato and pepper. Eggplants are native to Asia and Africa and, though perennial in warm areas, typically they are grown as warm-season annuals in the U.S. Because of the distinctive flavor and texture, eggplant is not as widely grown as other warm season vegetables. Many varieties have been developed, some of which produce very colorful fruit; purple, black, yellow, white and red.

Growth Requirements

Eggplant is very tender and more susceptible to cold injury than tomato. Therefore, planting should occur well after the danger of frost. It also requires a long growing season, generally around 90 days after transplanting to the garden. The best conditions for growth are temperatures of around 80 to 90 degrees during the day and 70 to 80 degrees at night. Eggplants also require a considerable amount of moisture for good fruit development. Additional water should be supplied when dry conditions prevail.

Soil Conditions

Like pepper and tomato, eggplant will do well in soils which are well-drained and loamy in texture. A good supply of organic matter is important to balance soil moisture. Soil tests should indicate a pH of 5.5 to 6.5.

Seeding and Planting

Transplanting 6 to 8-inch tall seedlings is the best way to begin growing eggplant. Seed should be started indoors at least 6 to 8 weeks before the frost-free date (May 10). Germination should occur within 7 to 10 days. Providing bottom heat is helpful for faster germination and growth.

Plants should be hardened off outdoors for 10 days before being planted into the garden. Because of sensitivity to cold conditions, the soil temperature should be above 65 degrees in the garden at transplanting. Plant spacing should be about 2 feet apart with rows 3 feet apart. No staking is typically necessary, however, some support may be helpful to keep the plants upright as the fruits mature.

Cultural Requirements

After transplanting, mulch should be applied to conserve moisture, reduce weed pressure and avoid soil compaction. Use either bark, plastic film covered with bark, straw or some other available organic material. After the plants have set their first fruit, apply a complete garden fertilizer such as 10-10-10 or 12-12-12 at the rate of 2 tablespoons per plant or 3 pound per 100 ft of row as a side dressing.

Harvesting and Storage

Eggplants can be harvested at anytime before developing to full size. However, be sure to pick the fruit before it turns brown. Typically, eggplant fruit are ripe within 80 to 90 days after plants are transplanted and you should expect to get 3 to 4 from each plant. Overly ripe fruit will become soft and seedy. Use a sharp knife to cut the fruit instead of twisting them off. Leave a small part of the stem attached to the fruit. Eggplant fruit do not store well. Refrigeration under moist conditions is recommended to prolong storage, but you should not expect eggplant to last more than 1 week. Immature fruit generally lasts a few days longer than full sized fruit.

Recommended Varieties

The following is a list of varieties recommended for growing in St. Louis.

Standard Types (oval shape)

'Black Beauty'

'Dusky'

'Early Bird'

Oriental Types (cylindrical shape)

'Ichiban'