

Growing the Perfect Eggplant
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Grilled, fried or baked, there's nothing like the flavor of fresh home grown eggplant. And talk about a beautiful fruit! Who can resist the sight of this purple orb with shiny smooth skin in the garden? Follow these few tips and you'll have an abundance of eggplant to consume or give away.

Eggplant belongs to the same family (Solanacea) as the tomato, pepper and potato, and as such shares some of the same growing needs. It is believed that the eggplant originated in India, but was broadly consumed in Asia as well. It was brought to Europe during the Middle Ages by traders. In those days, eggplants were thought to have magical properties including the power to bring on insanity. Other sources also point out that the Moors brought the eggplant to Spain. The Spaniards in turn, carried the eggplant to the New World. Eggplant got its name because some of the early cultivars were yellow or white and resembled goose or chicken eggs.

Probably the most important thing to note about growing eggplant is that it cannot tolerate cold. Most cultivars require a frost-free period of between 100 to 140 days to mature. Eggplants prefer a daytime temperature of between 75 and 85 degrees F and a nighttime temperature at or above 65 degrees F. Thus, it is very important to hold off setting out transplants for at least a month after the last frost date in your area. If your growing season is short, consider some of the early varieties like Dusky and Early Bird. Be sure to set the plants out in a warm but sheltered spot. For the standard varieties that yield large, plump fruits, thin the fruits so that there is only one per main branch, or three to six per plant. It is not necessary to thin the smaller varieties or the Oriental types. White ornamental varieties are available and edible, but not recommended for their flavor.

Give your eggplant a lot of space in the garden. The plants should be spaced in rows that are three feet apart, allowing two feet between plants. Fertilize the plants every few weeks with a complete fertilizer formulated for vegetables. Eggplant needs well-drained soil and fortunately for Northern California gardeners, eggplant does not do well in humid climates. Keep the beds weed free. Mulching will help cut down on the weeds and preserve moisture. Harvest the fruits when they are between 4 and six inches in diameter (for standard varieties). Eggplant is ready when the plant's flesh does not spring back when gently pressed. Be sure to harvest the fruits as soon as they are mature to encourage the plant to continue producing more eggplant. Do not pull the fruit off the plant, use pruning shears or scissors to remove the eggplant, cutting it off with its cap and some of the stem.

Eggplant is low in fat and calories and contains fiber. Many cooks sprinkle salt on sliced or cubed eggplant and allow it to drain for about 30 minutes before continuing with their

recipe. The salting removes moisture and helps cut down on the amount of oil needed to prepare the eggplant.

Bon Appétit!

The UCCE Master Gardeners are presenting a class on “The Herbal Garden” tomorrow, May 8, beginning at 9 a.m. in the Veterans Memorial Building at 130 Placerville Drive in Placerville. Master Gardeners are also available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512, walk-ins are welcome. The office is located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at http://ceeldorado.ucdavis.edu/Master_Gardener/.