

# EGGPLANT

Gardening tips provided by  
Jefferson Farm & Gardens



## Overview

Eggplant, *Solanum melongena*, is a warm season vegetable of the Solanaceae family and is related to peppers, tomatoes, and potatoes. In the 5th century, wealthy women in China created a dye from the skin of eggplant to stain their teeth black. Once polished, their teeth took on a silver hue. Eggplant is very low in calories and is good source of fiber, potassium, and folic acid.

## Choosing Varieties

There are different varieties of eggplant available that differ in days till maturity, disease resistance, fruit color, and shape, as well as other traits. A few recommended varieties for Missouri and other Midwest states are:

- Black Beauty (deep purple, heirloom)
- Casper (long, white fruit and ripens early)
- Ichiban (long, slender fruit and prolific)
- Rosa Bianca (round, violet and white fruit)

It is recommended to try a few varieties to determine overall plant performance and personal preference.

## Planting Tips

Eggplant is a warm season vegetable and is more sensitive to cold weather than peppers and tomatoes.

For best results, seedlings should be transplanted into the garden instead of direct seeding. In Missouri, seedlings can be planted mid-to-late May when the danger of a freeze has passed, and the soil has warmed sufficiently.

Seeds can be started indoors under lights about 8 weeks before the transplanting date. Seeds should be planted about ½ inch deep in individual containers or cell packs with well-drained potting soil. Seedlings should be hardened off before transplanting by setting plants outside in the shade a week before planting.

Eggplant seedlings should be planted at the same depth they were growing in containers. If the seedling is long and leggy, it can be planted on its side while covering some of the long stem with a light layer of soil. The stem will bend upward and the covered portion will sprout roots. Eggplant seedlings should be planted at a spacing of 18-24 inches apart within the row with about 3 feet between rows.

## Soil Fertility and Pest Control

Eggplant seedlings should be planted in well-drained soils and would benefit from the addition of nutrients either in the form of a complete fertilizer or aged compost. Once eggplant seedlings become established, they are heat and drought tolerant. Spread mulch around the plants to conserve moisture and reduce weeds.

Flea beetles eat tiny holes in the leaves and can be particularly harmful to young plants. Colorado potato beetle larvae and adults can completely defoliate young eggplant seedlings. Chemicals containing the organic compound pyrethrin can be used to control an infestation of flea beetles and Colorado potato beetles (be sure to follow product labels). Aphids can also be a problem and can be controlled with insecticidal soap.

Members of the Solanaceae family should be rotated with other crops every year to avoid verticillium wilt, which causes plants to turn yellow, wilt, and die.

## Harvesting

Eggplant can be harvested after it has reached at least half of its mature size (while the skin is glossy). Eggplant should be cut from the plant with a knife or pruning shears rather than twisted. Dull skin and brown coloring are signs that the eggplant is too mature to eat, resulting in a spongy texture and bitter flavor. If the plant is harvested regularly, it will continue to produce throughout the season. Eggplant does not store well, so it should be used promptly.

## Seed Sources

Eggplant seedlings are available in the spring at local garden centers. Eggplant seed can be ordered from mail order companies via phone or website. Johnny's Selected Seeds (1-877-564-6697, johnnyseeds.com) and Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds (1-417-924-8917, rareseeds.com) are two companies that sell eggplant varieties.

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