Eggplant in the Garden and the Kitchen

Eggplant, a staple of Mediterranean, Southeast Asian, and Italian cuisine, has become a popular addition to the garden and kitchen in recent years.

History and Cultivation

A member of an infamous family—Solanaceae—eggplant (Solanum melongena), is related to some notable poisonous plants such as belladonna (Atropa belladonna) and jimsonweed (Datura stramonium). The latter is listed as invasive in Pennsylvania. Conversely, many of our favorite vegetable staples belong to the nightshade family, including tomatoes, peppers, potatoes, ground cherries, and tomatillos.

Records show that eggplant originated in South Asia and East Asia, encompassing India and China. Cultivation of the plant began around 50 BCE. Seeds made their way along trade routes to Europe. It was Thomas Jefferson who brought eggplant to the United States via seeds from France. A white eggplant and a purple variety were grown at Monticello in 1812. In 1825 garden catalogs began listing eggplant seeds for sale.

In Britain, eggplants are known as aubergines. For a long time, eggplants were only prized as ornamentals and entered into exhibitions and competitions. Most gardeners were afraid to eat the fruits because of the notoriously poisonous relatives of eggplant. This fear may have been a remnant from medieval Europe when the fruit was known as "mad apples" or Mala insana. Also, the fruits were small, about chicken egg size (hence the common name).

In 1904, a cookbook with an eggplant recipe was published. The typical eggplant in grocery stores today is the large purple-black globe. However, there are many more varieties, which range in shape, size, color, and flavor. They are often grouped by their use in cuisine or their size or shape, i.e., "Asian (Japanese or Chinese)," "Globe or American," "Italian," or "Miniature."
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variety</th>
<th>Shape</th>
<th>Flavor</th>
<th>Color</th>
<th>Days to Maturity</th>
<th>Suitable For</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>'Black Beauty'</td>
<td>Globe</td>
<td>Meaty, classic</td>
<td>Purple-black</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>Garden bed or container</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Calliope'</td>
<td>Oval</td>
<td>Sweet and mild</td>
<td>White and purple variegation</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>Container</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Fairy Tale'</td>
<td>Small, elongated oval</td>
<td>Sweet, non-bitter</td>
<td>White and purple variegation</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Container</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Gretel'</td>
<td>Petite, elongated oval</td>
<td>Mild, delicate</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Container</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Kermit'</td>
<td>Small, round</td>
<td>Deep green with white blossom end</td>
<td>Crunchy and mild</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Garden bed or container</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Orient Express'</td>
<td>Slender, elongated oval</td>
<td>Purple-black</td>
<td>Tender, delicate</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>Garden bed or container</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Patio Baby'</td>
<td>Globe</td>
<td>Purple-black</td>
<td>Rich, mild, sweet</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Container</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Rosa Bianca'</td>
<td>Globe</td>
<td>Rosy-lavender</td>
<td>Delicate</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>Garden bed or container</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A number of pests and diseases will afflict eggplants. The eggplant flea beetle is common. It makes recognizable holes in the leaves, which will severely harm smaller plants with few leaves rather than large plants. To reduce flea beetle impact, remove debris, which reduces overwintering spaces, control weeds, and, if possible, transplant a week or so later than usual. Transplanting later may allow the eggplant to grow sturdier and larger and become less susceptible to pests. Other pests of eggplant include Colorado potato beetles, aphids, hornworms, whiteflies, and stinkbugs. Diseases that affect other Solanaceae family members also will harm eggplant. These include blossom end rot, Cercospora leaf spot, and early blight. Additional information about eggplant pests and diseases can be found on the Penn State Plant Village site and Diagnosing Common Problems in the Vegetable Garden.

### Eggplant in the Kitchen

#### Harvesting

Depending on the variety, eggplants will be ready for harvest in 65 to 80 days from transplanting. They are mature when they have shiny/glossy skin and feel firm when gently squeezed. Don’t wait too long to harvest because the skin of overmature eggplants will become dull, their seeds will become hard and brown, and the flesh will become pithy and bitter.

Eggplant needs to be cut from the plant using a garden hand pruner or sharp kitchen knife. Don’t be tempted to pull or twist the fruit from the plant. Leave about an inch of stem and be aware that the stems are bristly. Consider wearing garden gloves while harvesting eggplant.

#### Storing

Eggplant is considered to be highly perishable and is best used as soon after harvesting as possible. The fruit falls into the category of needing cool (not cold), moist storage. Eggplants can be stored in a paper bag in the coolest place in the house for up to two days. Alternatively, place in the warmest part of the refrigerator, ideally 45° to 50°F with 80 to 90% relative humidity. Use within 4 to 5 days, no longer than a week.
Preserving

There are no research-based processes for canning this low-acid vegetable.

Eggplant is a vegetable that is also not generally preserved through drying. The quality of dried eggplant is rated by the food science experts as "poor to fair." Nonetheless, instructions are available from Colorado State University.

Eggplant slices can be frozen, but should be blanched first for 4 minutes in boiling water that contains lemon juice (½ cup bottled lemon juice for each gallon of water). Then cool in ice water, drain, and package. Complete instructions can be found through the National Center for Home Food Preservation.

Preparing and Cooking

Before any food preparation, clean countertops and utensils. Wash your hands with soap and warm water.

To use eggplant, wash it, and cut off both ends. The skin is edible, but may be too "chewy." Eggplant is naturally a little bitter. Sprinkle round slices or chopped pieces with salt and let them sit for 30 minutes. The salt will draw out some of the bitterness and the moisture. This process also prevents the eggplant from absorbing too much oil during cooking. Rinse off the salt before using.

Eggplant is used famously throughout the Mediterranean. Eggplant Parmesan, eggplant caponata, ratatouille, and Greek moussaka are well-known dishes. Eggplant halves can be stuffed with non-meat or meat-based mixtures and baked, as one does with peppers. Two wonderful dips use eggplant as a main ingredient: Lebanese baba ganoush and Greek melitzanosalata. Eggplant slices or cubes can also be basted with olive oil, topped with fresh herbs such as oregano and basil, and grilled alongside peppers, zucchini, and mushrooms. I like to bake oiled and well-seasoned rounds at a low temperature until they become almost completely dry but still pliable. I freeze these and use throughout the winter to add flavor to pizzas and frittatas.

The following is a favorite recipe for eggplant Parmesan. It is delicious, but also perhaps a little healthier in that it uses eggplant rounds that have been baked instead of fried. I have had great success in freezing the baked eggplant rounds in the summer using the bounty from my garden (Steps 1 through 4 in the recipe below). Let the rounds cool after baking, then place the amount needed for the recipe in a freezer-quality gallon plastic zipper bag. I place the rounds in two layers, separated with a sheet of freezer paper or parchment paper. This bag can be pulled from the freezer on a cold winter morning, thawed in the refrigerator, and used in making the recipe that evening; it is a real time-saver.

Recipe

Baked Eggplant Parmesan

Ingredients:

- Extra-virgin olive oil, for brushing baking sheets
- 2 large eggs
- ⅔ cup plain dry breadcrumbs (seasoned breadcrumbs add additional flavor)
- ⅔ cup finely grated Parmesan cheese, plus 2 Tbs. for topping
- 1 tsp. dried oregano
- ½ tsp. dried basil
- salt and freshly ground pepper
- 2 large eggplants (2 ½ pounds total), peeled and sliced into ½-inch rounds
- 6 cups (48 ounces) store-bought or homemade chunky tomato sauce
- 1 ½ cups shredded mozzarella (low fat works well)

Directions:

1. Preheat oven to 375°F. Brush 2 baking sheets with oil and set aside. In a wide, shallow bowl, whisk together eggs and add 2 tablespoons water.
2. In another bowl, combine breadcrumbs, 3/4 cup Parmesan, oregano, and basil. Season with salt and pepper.
3. Dip eggplant slices in egg mixture, letting excess drip off, then dredge in breadcrumb mixture and coat well. Place on baking sheets.
4. Bake until golden brown on bottom, 20 to 25 minutes. Turn slices and continue baking until browned on other side, 20 to 25 minutes more. Remove from oven.
5. Raise oven heat to 400°F.
7. Arrange half the eggplant in dish.
8. Cover eggplant with 2 cups sauce, then 1/2 cup mozzarella. Repeat with remaining eggplant, sauce, and mozzarella.
9. Sprinkle with remaining 2 tablespoons Parmesan. Bake until sauce is bubbling and cheese is melted, 15 to 20 minutes. Let stand 5 minutes before serving.

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