

A Versatile Favorite: Eggplant

Eggplant is a summer vegetable in the nightshade family. It is in the same family as tomatoes and peppers, so its needs are similar. Eggplants require full sun (8-10 hrs.) and warm temperatures (70-85°). Therefore, transplants, also known as starter plants, may be put in the ground two weeks after the last frost date, which occurs about May 15th in Ocean County. Plant both long-season and short-season varieties at the same time so you can harvest over a longer period.

Eggplants need soil that has plenty of organic matter, is well-drained and has a pH of 6 – 6.8. Drainage can be improved by mounding the soil slightly, if necessary. Allow 18" to 24" between plants. Eggplant needs two cups of water a week or watering to a depth of 1.5". In very hot weather, water twice a week. Use 1.5 to 3 tablespoons of 5-10-5 fertilizer three weeks after planting and monthly thereafter.

With proper monitoring, you can control insects found early. If flea beetles are a problem, you can cover the plants with a row cover until flowers start to appear, then remove the cover. Any small insects that are found can be hand-picked or sprayed off with a hose. Remember to rotate crops, year to year, to avoid soil-borne diseases.

Depending on the variety, eggplants can grow 24 to 30" high so they will benefit from a support to keep them from flopping over, especially as the fruit matures. Harvest when the fruit is dark and glossy by cutting the stem with a pruner or sharp scissor. Wear gloves to protect your hands from the spiny stem. Avoid bruising the fruit when handling it. The fruit may be kept on the kitchen counter until ready to use.

The most common variety is the dark purple oval-shaped one we see at the grocery store or farm stand. There are others that are thin and long or round, striped, white or yellow. There are many ways to serve eggplant; it combines well with onions and tomatoes. Modern cooks also stir-fry, stew, grill or bake it. The only way to save it is by freezing, so enjoy it while it is in season.

For more information on eggplant, please see Rutgers Fact Sheet FS043 "**International Eggplants**" at <https://njaes.rutgers.edu/pubs/publication.php?pid=FS043>

Checklist for June

Flower and Vegetable Garden

- ✓ Remove spent flowers from annuals to encourage more blooms. Please see Penn State Extension "**Deadheading.**" <https://extension.psu.edu/programs/master-gardener/counties/chester/how-to-gardening-brochures/deadheading>
- ✓ Feed and mulch vegetable plants as they start to flower.
- ✓ Trim back spring-blooming clematis and wisteria vines after they bloom.
- ✓ Use a rain barrel to harvest water to irrigate. See Rutgers Fact Sheet FS450 "**Using Water Wisely in the Garden.**" <https://njaes.rutgers.edu/pubs/publication.php?pid=FS450>

Trees and Shrubs

- ✓ Check roses for black spot and powdery mildew. Treat accordingly.
- ✓ Remove flowers of roses after they fade.
- ✓ Pick Japanese beetles by hand and drown them in soapy water. Please see University of Maryland Extension "**Japanese Beetles.**" <https://extension.umd.edu/hgic/japanese-beetles>

Lawn

- ✓ Withhold lawn fertilizer until fall. Leave clippings on the lawn to add nitrogen to the soil.
- ✓ Spot treat weeds.
- ✓ Water ½" at a time, at least 1" weekly, including rainfall.