

Wonderful Eggplants

The eggplant, *Solanum melongena*, belongs to a diverse group, which includes tomatoes, peppers, potatoes, and tobacco (collectively referred to as nightshades). Eggplants were first cultivated in Asia more than 2,000 years ago. Thomas Jefferson introduced eggplants in America and grew both purple and white types. The most common eggplant grown today is the large purple eggplant. Varieties have been bred to include both large and small eggplants with colors including purple, white, striped, green, and orange. New Jersey grows more acres of eggplant than any other state.

Eggplants are large warm season edibles. A long growing season of 3-4 months, warm weather, and 6-8 hours of sun daily are needed for successful growth. In New Jersey, set out transplants in the garden after all danger of frost passes and night temperatures are above 50°F.

Plant in rich, sandy, well-drained soil that has not grown any nightshade plants for at least three years. Rotate crops to decrease insect and disease problems. Incorporate well-rotted manure into the planting bed prior to planting. The plants need slightly acidic soil (pH of 6.0-6.8). Space plants 18-24 in. apart in rows 30-36 in. apart. Stake or cage plants to prevent branches breaking from heavy fruit. If grown in containers, 5-gallon containers are optimal.

Eggplants are sensitive to water and fertilization stress. Deep irrigation of 1-2 in. of water each week produces the best growth. Drip irrigation is ideal; avoid overhead watering. Overhead watering promotes viral, fungal, and bacterial diseases. The addition of mulch retains moisture and warmth; it also helps to maintain a weed-free garden. Common insect pests are aphids and flea beetles. Knock aphids off plants with water from a hose. Spray insecticidal soap for heavy infestations. Use row covers to prevent flea beetles. If flea beetles are present, use an approved insecticide such as spinosad. Inconsistent watering and lack of soil calcium can result in blossom end-rot, a plant disorder.

Eggplants are heavy feeders. A soil test gives information as to nutrients present or lacking in the soil. In the absence of a soil test, prepare the soil using a balanced fertilizer prior to planting. Side-dress plants with nitrogen fertilizer as the fruits develop. Work gently into the soil and water well. See Rutgers Fact Sheet FS626 "Fertilizing the Home Vegetable Garden." Varieties which grow well in New Jersey include the large purple Italian Black Beauty; the white and violet Rosa Bianca; and the long slender Japanese types, Ichiban and Millionaire.

Checklist for June

Flower and Vegetable Garden

- ✓ Remove spent flowers from annuals to encourage more blooms.
- ✓ Check the soil in container plants daily. They tend to dry out quickly.
- ✓ 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 ornamentals. See Rutgers Fact Sheet FS450 "Using Water Wisely in the Garden."

Trees and Shrubs

- ✓ Follow Integrated Pest Management (IPM) methods and do not spray trees and shrubs preventatively.
- ✓ Apply mulch on flower beds and around shrubs to conserve moisture, protect plant roots, suppress weeds, and regulate soil temperature. Keep mulch away from trunks and stems.
- ✓ Look for bagworms hatching. If eggs have not hatched, remove bags by hand. Treat caterpillars with *Bacillus thuringiensis* or spinosad.

Lawn

- ✓ Withhold lawn fertilizer until fall.
- ✓ Leave clippings on the lawn to add nitrogen to the soil.
- ✓ Spot treat weeds.
- ✓ Water 0.5 in. at a time, at least 1 in. weekly, including rainfall.