



Easy Gardening

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*Joseph Masabni, Assistant Professor and Extension Horticulturist,
 and Patrick Lillard, Extension Assistant, The Texas A&M System*

Eggplant originated in India and is a member of the nightshade family, which includes potato and tomato. At one time the Spanish called it the “apple of love” and considered it an aphrodisiac. Other Europeans called it the “mad apple” and thought it caused insanity. While neither has been proved, eggplant is known to be very nutritious. It is a great source of fiber and has a fair amount of iron, potassium and protein.

Soil preparation

Eggplant prefers well-drained, fertile, sandy loam soils with a pH between 5.5 and 7.2. Remove all weeds and till the soil to loosen it to a depth of 6 to 10 inches. The higher the organic matter content of the soil the better, so incorporate a 3- to 4-inch layer of compost if possible.

Varieties

There are many different varieties of eggplant, including the small, round, green

‘Kermit’ eggplants; the skinny, long Japanese pickling eggplant; and the traditional large ‘Black Bell’ eggplant.

Suggested varieties for Texas include:

- Black Bell
- Black Magic
- Epic
- Classic
- Florida High Bush
- Florida Market
- Night Shadow

Oriental-type varieties that do well in Texas include ‘Ichibon’ and ‘Tycoon’.

Planting

Although eggplant can be seeded directly into the garden, it is always better for the beginning gardener to use transplants. If you can’t find the varieties you want in garden centers, make sure you start seeds 6 to 8 weeks before they are to be transplanted outside. Grow the seeds indoors. They will germinate in 5 days if kept at 86 degrees F,

but could take up to 14 days at 65 degrees F. Eggplant is a tropical plant, so it is very sensitive to cold and should not be planted outside until after all risk of frost has passed and daytime temperatures are at least 65 degrees F. The plants will grow to 2 to 4 feet, so space them 24 to 36 inches apart.

Fertilizing

Eggplant needs a consistent supply of nutrients. It is best to get a soil test and follow its recommendations.

If no soil test is conducted, add a total of 2 to 3 pounds of a complete fertilizer (6-12-12, 10-10-10, or 9-16-16) per 1,000 square feet. Apply half the fertilizer before planting and the other half after the first fruits appear.

After transplanting the eggplant, pour ¼ cup of starter solution around each plant. Make a starter solution by dissolving 2 tablespoons of a complete fertilizer in 1 gallon of water.

Watering

Eggplant also needs consistent water, at least 1 inch per week. It is better to give one thorough soaking than several frequent, short waterings, because frequent watering promotes shallow roots.

Weather and soil type, of course, will affect water demand. High temperatures, high winds, and sandy soils will all increase the need for water.

Care

Keep weeds under control because they compete with plants for water, nutrients and light. Many different types of mulch can be used, both organic and inorganic, to conserve soil moisture and reduce weed competition.

Insects

Name and description	Control	
	<p>Cutworm — Larvae have rough skin with various size conical granules.</p>	<p>Bt neem oil diatomaceous earth spinosad</p>
	<p>Eggplant flea beetle — 1/16 inch long; bronze-black, blue, or green, with light markings; jumps quickly; eats holes in leaves.</p>	<p>Sevin® neem oil diatomaceous earth spinosad</p>
	<p>Serpentine leafminer — Small, yellowish larvae inside the leaves; cause tunnels or trails on the leaves.</p>	<p>remove infected leaves neem oil diatomaceous earth spinosad biological controls: Dacsure, Disureig-sure</p>
	<p>Spider mites — Barely visible to naked eye; spiderlike; suck juice from undersides of leaves; leaves lose color; may form tiny webs.</p>	<p>beneficial insects strong blasts of water insecticidal soaps neem oil diatomaceous earth spinosad</p>

Diseases

Quite a few diseases can damage eggplant at various stages, including seed rot, damping-off, anthracnose, late blight, alternaria leaf spot, and verticillium wilt.

Three conditions must be met for a disease to take hold: the presence of the disease pathogen, a susceptible host, and a favorable

environment. If any one of these elements is lacking, the disease cannot spread. It is much easier to prevent a disease than to control it.

Diseases can be prevented by planting resistant varieties, rotating crops, using proper irrigation and plant spacing, and practicing good sanitation (such as disposing of diseased plants).

Harvesting

The fruit can be harvested when they are one-third to full size. Harvest before the skin becomes dull and the seeds become hard. One general rule is if you lightly press the side of the fruit with your thumbnail and the indentation stays, then the fruit is ripe and ready to be picked.

While the fruit can be broken off the plant, it is better for the plant if they are cut off. Beware of the spines on the fruit stem, as they can hurt an ungloved hand. Handle

the harvested fruit gently so they don't get bruised.

Storing

Harvested fruit can be stored at 45 to 50 degrees F with 90 percent humidity for a week.

Serving

Eggplant can be cooked many ways. It can be baked, stewed, sautéed, fried or stuffed. It can be cooked whole or in pieces. It can be cubed and used in curries and stews. Baba ghanoush is a dip made from mashed or pureed eggplant with tahini, garlic, lemon juice, and a few other spices. And, of course, there is the ever popular eggplant Parmesan.

Acknowledgments

Insect photos courtesy of Bart Drees, The Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service.

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