

Advice on growing *eggplants*



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Question: For decades, I have planted and enjoyed a sizable vegetable garden. This year I would like to challenge myself and attempt to grow eggplants. What advice can you give me?

Answer: I admire your adventure-seeking desire to try something new. Eggplants, also known as aubergines, belong to the nightshade family.

Although often considered a vegetable, they are technically a fruit.

First of all, choosing the right time to start your eggplant journey is essential. These heat-loving plants require a relatively long growing season, so it's best to wait until after the threat of frost has passed before planting them outdoors. Aim for soil temperatures above 70 degrees.

Second, you need to find the perfect spot. Eggplants crave sunshine and warmth, so choose a location in your garden that receives at least six hours of direct sunlight per day. Additionally, make sure the spot is sheltered from strong winds, which can hinder their growth.

Consider planting them near a south-facing wall or use protective covers to create a microclimate that retains heat.

Then you need to prepare the soil. Eggplants prefer well-draining soil with a pH level between 5.5 and 7.0. A soil test is the most accurate guide to determining soil pH. Before planting, amend your soil with organic matter like compost or well-rotted manure to improve its fertility and drainage.

This will give your eggplants the nutrient-rich environment they need to thrive. Remember to remove any weeds or debris from the planting area to reduce competition for resources.

Next, you need to choose the right cultivars for our area. According to Oregon State University, 'Hansel' (black-purple), 'Gretel' (white) and 'Fairy Tale' (white and purple striped) have been proven to perform well. These are known for their adaptability and ability



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Often considered a vegetable, eggplants are technically a fruit.



Eggplant flowers are solitary, star-shaped and usually violet in color.



The leaves and stems of eggplants are covered with star-shaped hairs and sometimes prickles.

to produce an abundance of flavorful fruits.

You have two options when it comes to starting eggplants: sowing seeds directly or purchasing seedlings. If you choose seeds, start them

indoors about eight to 10 weeks before your intended transplanting date.

Use a seed-starting mix and maintain consistent temperatures of 70-81 degrees during the day and 64-70 degrees

at night to ensure successful germination.

Once your soil is ready and the weather is favorable, it's time to plant. Dig holes about 1.5-3 feet apart to allow adequate spacing between plants. Your rows should be 3-4 feet

apart. This will allow for proper airflow and room for growth.

Gently remove the seedlings from their containers, being careful not to damage the roots, and place them in the holes. Backfill the holes with soil, gently firming it around the base of the plants.

Watering is crucial during the early stages of growth. Keep the soil consistently moist but avoid overwatering, as eggplants are susceptible to root rot. Avoid wetting the leaves, as this can make the plants susceptible to diseases.

Watering in the morning allows the foliage to dry out during the day, reducing the risk of fungal infections. Applying a layer of organic mulch around the plants can help retain moisture and suppress weeds.

Eggplants are heavy feeders, so it's essential to provide them with regular nourishment throughout the growing season. Apply a balanced fertilizer to the soil every two or three weeks, following the package instructions.

To encourage healthy growth and higher yields, consider providing support for your eggplants. Staking or caging the plants will help keep them upright as they develop heavy fruits.

Eggplants can become targets for various pests like aphids, flea beetles and tomato hornworms. Keep a close eye on your plants and take preventive measures, such as using row covers, companion planting or organic insecticides, if necessary.

Regularly inspect the foliage for signs of damage and promptly remove any affected leaves or pests.

As the summer progresses, your eggplants will reward you with their glossy fruits. Harvest them when they reach their mature size and color, usually around 60-80 days after planting, depending on the cultivar. Use a pair of sharp garden shears or a knife to cut the fruits from the stem, leaving a short stem attached.

Hopefully these suggestions will help you successfully grow a crop of eggplants.

Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu, 541-672-4461 or 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.