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Eggplant

Eggplant, a warm-season crop, is among the easiest veggies to grow. It also ranks among the most beautiful, and the prettiest rarely make it to the supermarket - smooth, glossy globes, teardrops, half-moons or (yes) eggs in pink, green, yellow, white, lavender, violet and multi-colors.

Difficulty: Moderately Easy

Choose the sunniest site you can find for eggplant. Soil should be fertile, well-drained and rich in organic matter, with a pH of 5.8 to 6.8. Eggplant also needs a lot of calcium, so add lime to the soil before you plant.

Start seed indoors at least 8 to 10 weeks before the last expected frost.

Harden off seedlings, then transplant them to the garden when all danger of frost has passed and the soil temperature has reached 60 degrees F. Add a half-shovelful of compost or well-rotted manure to each hole before you set in the plant.

Set standard-size varieties 18 to 24 inches apart; compact and dwarf kinds can be a little closer together. Stake tall varieties to keep the fruits off the ground.

Place a paper collar around each stem to deter cutworms, and add floating row covers or cloches to protect new plants from cold, wind and insects.

Spray plants with compost tea or fish emulsion three weeks after transplanting and side-dress monthly with a balanced organic liquid fertilizer.

Give eggplant about an inch of water a week and, once the plants are established and the ground is warm, mulch to retain moisture and deter weeds.

Pinch back new blossoms about three weeks before the first expected frost. This will channel the plants' energy into maturing existing fruits rather than producing new ones that won't survive the frost.

Start picking eggplants as soon as they're big enough to use, and keep picking them till the fruits lose their gloss. If they're brown and hard, you've waited too long.

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