

Egg Fruit (Aubergine)

Sowing Outdoors:

- Not recommended

Sowing Indoors (to get a head start):

- For best results use sterile, disease free and weed free soil to start your seedlings.
- Sow eggplant seeds indoors 8 weeks before the last frost in spring using a seed starting kit.
- Sow seeds 0.5cm deep in seed-starting formula.
- Keep the soil moist at 23 degrees C.
- Seedlings emerge in 10-21 days.
- As soon as seedlings emerge, provide plenty of light on a sunny windowsill.
- Seedlings do not need much fertiliser, feed when they are 3-4 weeks old using a starter solution according to manufacturer's directions.
- If you are growing in small trays, you may need to transplant the seedlings to 10cm pots when seedlings have at least 3 pairs of leaves before transplanting to the garden so they have enough room to develop strong roots.
- Before planting in the garden, seedling plants need to be "hardened off".
- Accustom young plants to outdoor conditions by moving them to a sheltered place outside for a week.
- Be sure to protect them from wind and hot sun at first. If frost threatens at night, cover or bring containers indoors, then take them out again in the morning.
- This hardening off process toughens the plant's cell structure and reduces transplant shock and scalding.

Transplanting in the Garden:

- For best results use sterile, disease free and weed free soil.
- Select a location in full sun with good rich moist organic soil.
- Make sure you did not grow tomatoes, peppers, eggplant or potatoes in the bed the previous year to avoid disease problems.
- Prepare the bed by turning the soil under to a depth of 20cm. Level with a rake to remove clumps of grass and stones.
- Eggplants should be set 60cm to 90cm apart in a row with the rows spaced 90cm to 120cm apart.
- Dig a hole for each plant large enough to accommodate the root ball.
- Carefully remove the plant from its pot and gently loosen the root ball with your hands to encourage good root development.
- Fill the planting hole with soil to the top and press soil down firmly with your hand leaving a slight depression around the plant to hold water.
- Use a plant tag as a location marker.
- This is particularly important if you are trying different varieties.
- It is very difficult to tell which variety is which from the foliage.
- Water thoroughly, so that a puddle forms in the saucer you have created. This settles the plants in, drives out air pockets and results in good root-to-soil contact.
- Eggplants may also be planted in containers. Use a container at least 45cm to 60cm wide and deep and use a commercial potting mix rather than garden soil.

Growing Tips:

- Keep weeds under control during the growing season.
- Weeds compete with plants for water, space and nutrients, so control them by either cultivating often or use a mulch to prevent their seeds from germinating.
- Mulches also help retain soil moisture and maintain even soil temperatures.
- This is especially important for tomatoes as their roots may be easily damaged when weeding, and this can lead to blossom end rot.
- Keep plants well-watered during the growing season, especially during dry spells.
- Plants need about 2cm to 5cm of rain per week during the growing season.
- Use a rain gauge to check to see if you need to add water.
- It's best to water with a drip or trickle system that delivers water at low pressure at the soil level.
- If you water with overhead sprinklers, water early in the day so the foliage has time to dry off before evening, to minimise disease problems.
- Keep the soil moist but not saturated.
- Monitor for pests and diseases.
- Check with your local Garden Centre for pest controls recommended for your area.

Harvest and Preserving Tips:

- Pick regular-sized eggplants at 10 to 12cm, 60-70 days after transplanting into the garden.
- Look for firm fruits, with a glossy shine.
- Dull skin is a sign that the plants are overripe.
- Overripe fruit turn brownish and the flavour may be bitter.
- Hold firmly at the blossom end and cut with a knife or pruners.
- When cutting the fruit, leave 2.5cm of stem attached.
- Eggplants are prickly at the stem end so handle with care.
- Use eggplants immediately after harvesting.
- If you would like to freeze some for later use, cook the fruit first and then freeze.
- Eggplant makes a great substitute for meat in many dishes.

Sow indoors, on a warm kitchen windowsill at a temperature of 20-25°C.

However, for best germination results a heated propagator is best to ensure temperature remains the same.

Sow 0.5cm deep, thinly in a tray or pots of compost and keep moist.

Transplant seedlings to individual pots when large enough to handle.

Place in a bright location to grow on in cooler, but not cold conditions.

Plant out; one per 30cm pot, two plants per grow bag or 60cm apart in a greenhouse border.

When plants are 30cm high, pinch out the main growing tip to encourage branching.

Water regularly and feed with a liquid tomato fertiliser every two weeks once the first fruit has set.

Provide support with canes if necessary.

Plants may be grown outside in a warm, sunny sheltered location.

However, outdoor crops will be later and smaller.