



excellent eggplants

by Teresa O'Connor

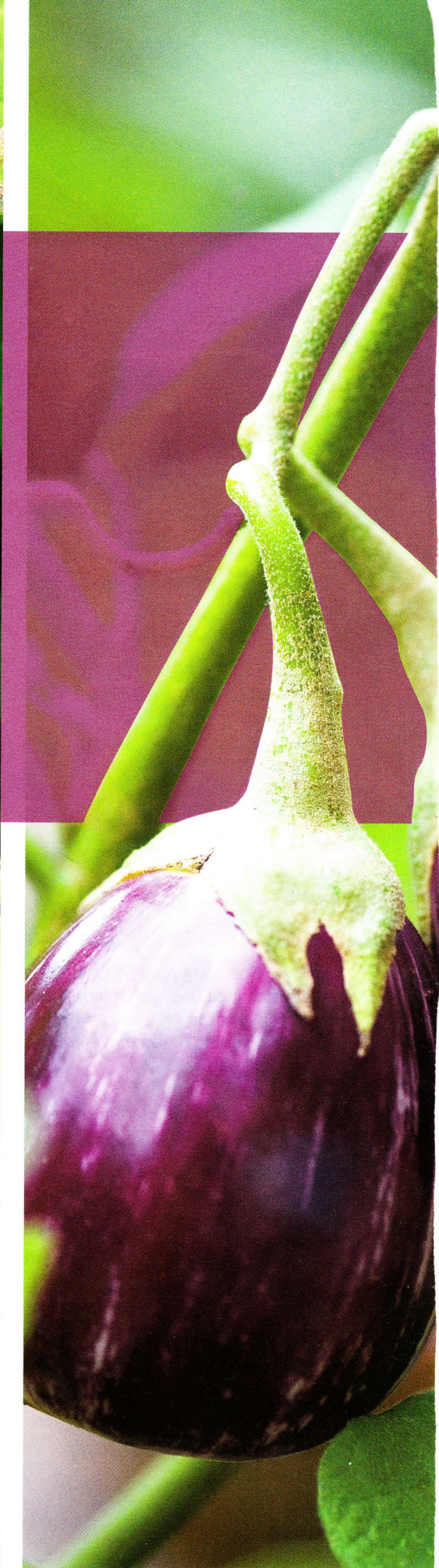
When you picture eggplants, do you think of huge purple monsters the size of a canoe? Think again. Today's eggplants come in a variety of interesting colors and sizes.

When you think of eggplants (*Solanum melongena*), you probably picture the large purple fruits that have been a garden favorite for generations. But these days, eggplants come in different tastes, colors, shapes, and sizes, from snow white 'Casper' to bright red 'Goyo Kumba' to light purple and white streaked 'Rosa Bianca'. Regardless of your climate or garden size, there's an eggplant that's just right for you.

PHOTOS: 'GRETEL', BILL JOHNSON; 'CALLIOPE', ROB CARDILLO



Small eggplants like 'Gretel' **(above)** and 'Calliope' **(right)** grow just a few inches long.



Eggplants are essential in culinary dishes around the world, such as baba ganoush, eggplant parmigiana, and moussaka. Believed to have originated in India, eggplants were cultivated in ancient China and enjoyed for centuries in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa.

In Europe and the United States, however, eggplants were long considered dangerous, because they belonged to the nightshade family (Solanaceae). This botanical family contains poisonous plants like angel's trumpet and belladonna. But it also includes edibles like tomatoes.

did you know?

Eggplants are botanically a fruit, even though we eat them as a vegetable.

Fortunately, eggplants have earned a solid spot in our kitchens, and deserve a prominent place in our gardens, too.

Sowing seeds

You can start eggplants as seeds or purchase them as transplants. Cold-climate gardeners should consider cultivars with shorter ripening times, such as 'Bambino' (45 days)

or 'Little Fingers' (65 days).

It can be tricky to germinate eggplant seeds, but the advantage is that you'll find a larger selection in seed catalogs than in garden centers. Start seeds indoors two months before transplanting. Eggplants need at least 72°F to germinate, and bottom heat can help. In the right growing conditions, seeds germinate in

shape shifters

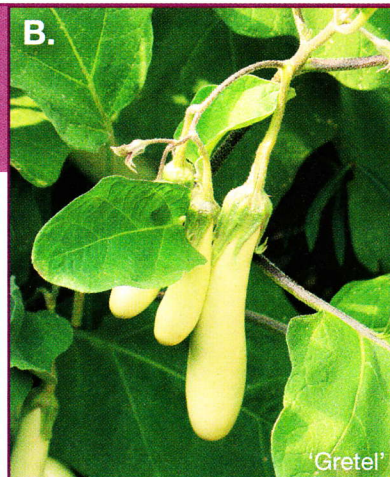
Eggplants are often classified by their shape.

A. Western or globe: Large, deep purple eggplants, the kind most often found in grocery stores.

B. Elongated or cylindrical: Slender eggplants ranging from lavender to pale green to pure white to nearly black. Many figure prominently in Asian cuisine.

C. Round or egg-shaped: Oval or round in shape, these eggplants come in different colors from green to purple.

D. Tear drops: Vibrant colors and stripes adorn this fruit, which is as pretty as it is delicious.



PHOTOS: DAVID CAVAGNARO (A,C,D); BILL JOHNSON (B)

18 eggplants to try

Western/globe

'Black Beauty' (74 days) Heirloom with large, dark purple fruit that grows 1 to 3 pounds.

'Florida High Bush' (76 to 80 days) Introduced in the 1940s, this variety, with large purple-black fruit, is disease- and drought-tolerant.

Elongated or cylindrical

'Fairy Tale' (50 to 63 days) Perfect for containers, it has clusters of lavender and white striped fruit. All-America Selections winner 2005.

'Gretel' (55 days) Beautiful white fruit grows on compact plants, which are lovely in containers. All-America Selections winner 2009.

'Hansel' (55 days) Dark purple eggplants are harvested as baby vegetables or allowed to grow to full size of 9 to 10 inches. Grows well in containers. All-America Selections winner 2008.

'Little Fingers' (65 days) Harvest dark purple fruits when they are the size of your finger or allow them to grow larger. Open-pollinated plants are ideal for containers.

'Pingtung Long' (65 to 70 days) From Taiwan come dark lavender eggplants that grow 12 inches long and 1 inch in diameter.

'Thai Green' (70 to 80 days) Heirloom fruit with tender light green skin grows on prolific and drought-resistant plants.

Round or egg-shaped

'Applegreen' (62 to 70 days) Pale green, oval eggplants grow 5 inches in diameter. Tolerates cool, wet conditions.

'Bambino' (45 days) Showy lavender flowers turn to round dark purple fruit on compact hybrid plants.

'Goyo Kumba' (90 to 100 days) Slightly flattened, round, red eggplants; an African heirloom. Cultivar of *Solanum aethiopicum*.

'Lao Purple Stripe' (90 days) Lovely lavender 2-inch-round fruits on productive plants. Eat when small.

'Round Mauve' (80 to 90 days) Mauve fruits best eaten the size of tennis balls. Originally from China, compact plants grow well in containers.

'Rosa Bianca' (80 to 90 days) Round 4-inch fruit streaked with white and lavender. This Italian heirloom is beloved by chefs.

Tear drops

'Calliope' (64 days) Compact plants, ideal for containers. Small fruit is violet streaked with white.

'Listada de Gandia' (80 to 90 days) A star in the Italian kitchen, this heirloom produces beautiful purple striped eggplants.

'Striped Togo' (70 to 85 days) Striped fruit ripens from two-toned green to two-toned orange on this unusual heirloom.

'Udumalapet' (80 to 90 days) This heavy producer from India grows gorgeous green fruit with lavender stripes that later ripen to yellow. Fruit is best eaten small. Delicious in chutneys.





Support smaller eggplant cultivars like 'Fairy Tale' with a simple stake. Use tomato cages or wire rings for varieties with larger fruits.

seven to 10 days. Place under fluorescent lights when seedlings appear.

Before transplanting outside, harden off your seedlings. This means leaving them outside in a protected place for several hours a day, adding more time each day. They should be sturdy enough to plant in two weeks.

Growing eggplants

Eggplants require warm weather and at least six to eight hours of sun. Transplant eggplants only after temperatures are above 70°F during the day and above 45°F at night. You may need to wait several weeks after the last frost date.

Prepare soil by adding organic matter like composted manure or

well-rotted compost. Feed with a well-balanced fertilizer when planting and when plants flower.

Space transplants 2 feet apart, although smaller varieties need only 12 to 18 inches. Water 1 inch weekly. As plants grow, support them with tomato cages, stakes, or wire rings. Mulch well to prevent evaporation, maintain soil temperature, and reduce weeds.

Colorado potato beetles and flea beetles are common pests on eggplants. Try putting up fabric row covers when you transplant seedlings. Dislodge aphids and mites with a strong spray of water. Do this in the morning, so plants dry before evening. If this fails, try insecticidal soap.

Prevent soil-borne fungal diseases such as verticillium wilt by rotating crops. Avoid growing eggplants, tomatoes, peppers, potatoes, and other family members in the same spot more than once every three years. If you don't have enough space to rotate crops, consider growing eggplants in containers. Cultivars with smaller fruit, such as 'Hansel' and 'Gretel', are ideal for small-space or balcony gardeners. 🌱

Teresa O'Connor is the co-author of Grocery Gardening: Planting, Preparing & Preserving Fresh Foods (Cool Springs Press, 2010). She was trained as a master gardener in California and Idaho.

For sources, see Resource Guide on page 68.



For more information on growing edibles, visit www.gardeningclub.com and click on WebExtras.

PHOTO: BILL JOHNSON