

2008 - Year of the Eggplant

The eggplant has been celebrated as an aphrodisiac and feared as the cause of insanity. Today it is appreciated for both its inspiring beauty and delightful flavor. An essential ingredient in cuisines around the world, it is the essence of Greek moussaka, Middle Eastern baba ganoush, Italian eggplant parmigiana, and French ratatouille. The emergence of Asian cuisine has introduced a whole new range of eggplants flavoring delicious stir-fries and curries. Gardens and markets are filled with eggplants in a variety of sizes from small and pea-like, to egg shaped, to long and slender. Their fruits offer a stunning color palette from the traditional royal purple to shades of rose, violet, green, yellow and white, often enhanced with lovely stripes in a contrasting color.

Eggplant is believed to have originated in India and was cultivated in China as early as 500 B.C. Eaten in the Middle East and Asia for centuries, it was taken to Africa by the Arabs and Persians during the Middle Ages, eventually finding its way to Italy in the 14 th century. Even though eggplants were consumed without hesitation in other parts of the world, it was not eaten by all Europeans. In fact it was called mala insana —the mad apple or bad egg. The fruit was considered dangerous because it belonged to the nightshade family which contains many poisonous plants including jimson weed, angel’s trumpet, belladonna and deadly nightshade.

Eggplant was introduced to the United States in the early 1800's by our third president, Thomas Jefferson. An avid gardener, Jefferson was interested in discovering new plants and grew many flowers and vegetables from around the world in his extensive gardens at Monticello. Again because of its botanical connection to other poisonous plants, eggplant was slow to gain acceptance as an edible vegetable. Plants remained an ornamental curiosity until the late 1800's and early 1900's when Chinese and Italian immigrants arrived in America. Both of these cultures had a long and rich tradition of using eggplants in their cuisine and helped to spur culinary approval of the eggplant in North America.

John Gerard, the noted herbalist, described eggplants growing during the 16 th century as having “the bignesse of a Swans egge, and sometimes much greater, of a white colour, sometimes yellow and often browne.” It was these early varieties that gave them their English name of eggplant.

Eggplant is known around the world by a variety of common names. In its native India eggplant is known as brinjal. In Britain, France and other parts of Europe, it is called aubergine. Italians call it melanzana while the Greeks know it as melitzana. Australians refer to eggfruit and in Africa the eggplant is called a garden egg. These many names reflect the rich diversity of eggplant varieties available today.

Next week- Selecting Eggplant for the Home Garden

Source: National Garden Bureau, www.nbg.org.