

Eggplant Selections for the Home Garden

The National Gardening Bureau has designated 2008 as the Year of the Eggplant. Eggplants are frost-tender, herbaceous perennials that are grown as annuals in Nebraska. The branched plants reach 2-4 feet tall and are covered with hairy leaves, sometimes having tiny spines. The attractive, star-shaped flowers are usually purple, sometimes white, and produce edible fruit that may be black, purple, green, white, yellow, orange or red, sometimes striped or shaded. The flesh is a creamy white and speckled with tiny brown seeds.

Eggplants are generally classified by the shape of their fruit. There are five basic groups—globe, elongated or cylindrical, egg-shaped, specialty and pea eggplants. The most common type in North America is the Western or oval eggplant that has large, deep purple, pear-shaped fruits. These types are most commonly used for stuffing, baking, sautéing and grilling. Unfortunately, they have the undeserved reputation for having tough skin and bitter flavor, generally not a problem when harvested fresh from your own garden.

- Black Beauty (80 days) is the classic eggplant with deep purple skin and white flesh. The large 8-10 inch fruits can weigh up to a pound.
- Dusky hybrid (63 days) is an improved variety that produces smaller, 5-7 inch, purple-black fruits (TMV)

Japanese varieties are typically small fruited with a variety of shapes, and thin skinned in beautiful, deep purple or light violet colors, sometimes blended with white or green. The skin is tender so fruits don't need to be peeled. These varieties are ideal for stir-frying, grilling, sautéing and pickling.

- Ichiban hybrid (58 days) has long 10-inch fruits that are very deep purple, almost black in color.

Recently, two varieties have won the prestigious All-America Selections Award, the first eggplants to win in almost seventy years. Both have excellent flavor and texture, are highly productive over a long harvest period and widely adapted throughout North America.

- Fairy Tale hybrid (51 days) won in 2005 for its elegant white fruits striped in violet and purple shades, on compact plants. Fruits can be picked when small, only 1-2 ounces for a unique miniature eggplant, or left on the plant to double in size without losing any flavor or tenderness.

The new Hansel hybrid (55 days) is a 2008 award winner that produces clusters of glossy, dark purple fruits borne over a long season on plants that out yield traditional varieties. Fruits can be harvested when only 2-3 inches in length or left to grow to a full 6-10 inches long.

There are many specialty and heirloom eggplants available.

- Bambino hybrid (45 days) miniature 1-1½ inch eggplants produced on dwarf, 12-inch plants.
- Casper (70 days) is an elongated white eggplant with 6-inch fruits on compact plants.

- Easter Egg (52 days) is a fast maturing variety with highly ornamental, egg-shaped white fruits. While it is commonly sold as a novelty plant, the fruits are edible.
- Rosa Bianca (88 days) classic Italian heirloom variety prized for the extremely creamy interior flesh and beautiful skin in shades of rose, lavender and white.

Small, round-fruited types called pea eggplants grow in clusters that resemble bunches of grapes. About the size of a marble, the fruits are typically picked when a light green and still crisp. They are not widely available in North America because their bitter flavor doesn't always appeal to Western tastes. Most popular in Southeast Asia, India and China, they are used fresh to add unique zest to spicy curries and commonly pickled.

Next week- Growing Eggplant.

Source: National Garden Bureau.