

Growing Eggplant In The Home Garden

Eggplants can be started from seed or purchased as plants. Start seeds indoors about 6 to 8 weeks before the date you will be transplanting the seedlings outdoors. Seedlings are sensitive to transplant shock so it's best to start eggplant seeds in individual 2-4 inch diameter containers instead of trays or flats. Thoroughly moisten sterile, seed-starting mix then fill containers to within ½ inch of the top. Put 2-3 seeds in each small pot and cover with ¼ inch of seed-starting mix.

Eggplants love warm temperatures. A room temperature of at least 72°F is ideal for starting seeds. Seeds will germinate and begin to grow about 7-10 days later. Bottom heat encourages faster germination and growth. If seeds are slow to germinate, conditions may be too cool. It can take up to three weeks for seeds to germinate when the soil temperature is around 65°F and seeds won't germinate at all if the soil temperature is below 65°F. After seedlings appear, move the container to a bright, sunny window or place under plant lights. When seedlings have a couple sets of leaves, thin to the strongest plant by pinching or cutting excess seedlings at the soil line.

Eggplants can be transplanted into the garden when the air temperatures are usually above 70°F during the day and are usually above 45°F at night. The soil temperature should be at least 60°F. To warm the soil, cover the bed with a sheet of plastic mulch after preparing the soil for planting. The plastic can be left on throughout the growing season to prevent weeds and retain moisture.

Eggplants required full sun, 6-8 hours of direct sunlight each day, and prefer a rich, fertile soil with plenty of organic matter. Add well-rotted compost or manure before planting. If needed, work in a balanced, time-released fertilizer when preparing the soil. Apply eggplants 1 inch of water per week, to keep plants productive. A 1-2 inch layer of organic mulch such as well-rotted compost or manure helps retain moisture, improve the soil and provide weed control.

Be sure to follow harvest guidelines for the eggplant variety you are growing. In general, large-fruited eggplants are ready to harvest 75-95 days from transplanting, while the small-fruited varieties and many of the newer hybrids are ready to harvest within 50 to 60 days of planting outdoors. Fruits should feel firm and have a glossy colored skin. Press lightly on the skin of the eggplant with your finger. If the pressed spot springs back it is ripe; if the imprint remains the fruit is overripe and will tend to be seedy and somewhat bitter.

Harvest fruits regularly to keep plants producing. Use a sharp knife or pruning shears to cut the eggplants from the plant. Don't try to remove the fruit by twisting or pulling as this can damage or break the entire plant. In climates where the plants will die from frost, remove any new blossoms beginning about 4 weeks before the first fall frost. This will promote ripening of the existing fruits.

Eggplant fruits are best used fresh but will keep for about a week when loosely wrapped in a perforated plastic bag and stored in your refrigerator's vegetable crisper or in a cool pantry. To preserve eggplant for later use, blanch or steam slices or cubes and store in the freezer for up to 6-8 months.

Source: National Garden Bureau.