EGGPLANT

FIRST THINGS FIRST. Your plants may arrive dry and thirsty. Give them a drink, watering until the pot turns dark brown. Keep plants in a bright spot protected from cold, and plant after the last frost. Follow planting directions on the pot label and get more information at bonnieplants.com/growing/growing-eggplant.

GETTING STARTED
Eggplant is a must if you’re a fan of outdoor grilling. These stately plants grow well and look beautiful in containers, ornamental borders, raised beds, and traditional in-ground gardens. Small-fruited eggplant varieties tend to be especially heavy bearers, and you can expect to pick a dozen or more from each Ichiban plant over the summer in warm climates. Larger varieties like Black Beauty and White, which bear more traditional-sized fruits, are equally impressive whether in the garden or kitchen, where they can be stuffed, grilled, or combined with summer herbs and tomatoes in homemade eggplant parmesan. (See our simple, delicious recipe on the next page.)

Having a late cold spell? If planting is delayed due to cool weather in spring, keep your seedlings indoors at night and move them to a protected sunny spot outdoors during the day. While you await better planting conditions, you also can try this trick: Place 2 inches of moist potting soil in a 6-inch-wide container, gently break open the bottom of the biodegradable Bonnie pot, and nestle the eggplant seedling (one per container) into the soil about 1 inch deep. A bit of extra downward growing room will ensure that each plant’s primary taproot has ample space for expansion. Later on, after you plant the eggplant outside, this taproot will become the plant’s lifeline.

PLANTING
Eggplants are easy to grow in any sunny, well-drained spot, and are good candidates for roomy containers, too. Set plants out a week or two after your last frost, when the weather is settled and the temperature warms. All eggplants share a preference for a long, warm growing season. They grow into tall, angular plants so they often benefit from staking, which keeps branches from breaking when they become heavy with fruit. Install a stake or small tomato cage at planting time. Follow spacing guidelines found on the plant’s stick tag.

Prepare the soil. Eggplant grows best in soil with a pH between 6.3 and 6.8. Mix a 2- to 3-inch layer of compost into each planting hole. A generous amount of organic matter provides nutrients and helps the soil retain moisture.

Plant right. Set plants at the same depth at which they are growing in their containers. After planting, water well, then mulch each plant to keep the soil cool and moist.

Grow in containers. Eggplant is easy to grow in a pot if you use a big container (18 to 24 inches in diameter). Fill it with premium quality potting mix and mix in some compost. Keep the soil moist so the plant grows full-sized, healthy fruit. In cool climates, choose dark-colored pots to keep soil warmer.

FERTILIZING
Feed at planting with Bonnie Herb, Vegetable & Flower Plant Food to give eggplants a healthy boost. They will love the naturally based formula made from oilseed extract. Follow label directions—don’t overdo it. Continue to apply every 1 to 2 weeks.

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SIMPLE EGGPLANT PARMESAN

Great tasting Eggplant Parmesan doesn’t have to take hours. Use eggplant and herbs from your garden to create this classic, flavorful layered Italian dish. YIELD: 4 to 6 servings

INGREDIENTS:
- 15 ounces ricotta cheese
- 1 egg
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- ½ teaspoon pepper
- 1½ tablespoons chopped fresh basil
- 1 tablespoon chopped fresh rosemary
- 1 cup grated Parmesan cheese
- 1 cup shredded mozzarella cheese
- 1 large eggplant. cut into ⅛ - to ¼ - inch rounds
- 1 (26-ounce) jar spaghetti or tomato sauce
- Salt to taste

INSTRUCTIONS: Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Salt both sides of eggplant slices and let stand for 30 minutes; rinse and pat dry. Combine ricotta and egg in a small bowl and mix until smooth. Stir in garlic powder, pepper, basil, and rosemary. Set aside 1/3 cup each of Parmesan and mozzarella cheeses. Evenly spread 1/3 cup tomato sauce in a 9 x 12-inch baking dish. Layer half the eggplant slices, half the ricotta cheese mixture, half the Parmesan cheese, and half the remaining tomato sauce in the dish. Repeat the layers. Top with reserved 1/3 cup Parmesan cheese. Bake, covered with foil, for 45 minutes to 1 hour. Remove foil and bake for an additional 10 minutes or until cheese is lightly browned.

For more delicious eggplant recipes, visit bonnieplants.com/cooking.

TROUBLESHOOTING

The tiny black flea beetle is, by far, eggplant’s worst nemesis, but healthy plants usually produce well despite the tiny leaf holes made by these pests. In some areas, a common soil-borne fungus called verticillium wilt can cause eggplants to wilt and die. Where verticillium wilt is a common problem with non-resistant tomatoes (they are close cousins to eggplant), try growing eggplants in containers instead of in the ground.

In addition, be sure to water eggplants regularly, or the fruits will be small and bitter. Plants need a steady supply of moisture, but not so much that the soil ends up soggy. For best results, consider installing a drip irrigation system or soaker hose. Both methods supply water consistently and efficiently, putting moisture right where the plants need it.

HARVEST & USE

Eggplant fruits can taste bitter if picked when underripe or overripe, so harvesting is part of the eggplant grower’s art. A perfect fruit will have stopped growing, have a glossy skin, and show a sprinkling of soft yet well-formed seeds when you slice it open. Fruits with no visible seeds are immature, and those with hard, dark seeds are overripe. Use pruning shears to harvest fruits, leaving a short stub of stem attached (the fruits will not pull free by hand). Rinse clean, pat dry, and store in the refrigerator for several days. Eggplant discolors rapidly when cut open, so work quickly when preparing slices or skewers for grilling. Marinades that include salt, vinegar, and/or lemon juice will keep cut pieces of eggplant from darkening.

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