

## Beyond Tomatoes!

One cold day last week I left a friend's home with a container of eggplant soup pulled from her freezer. Sumptuous! Delicate creamy color, subtle herb seasoning, smooth texture equaled a perfect winter supper. The origin of this treat was the seeds of a white eggplant, a plant so productive that the bountiful harvest was both a challenge and delight to neighborhood cooks.

The name 'eggplant' was used for *Solanum melongena* because they were once white and egg shaped. Now they can be rose, mauve, striped in purple, shades of green and ebony as well as the expected purple. The origin of my soup gift was passalong seeds but Scheepers Kitchen Garden Seeds features 'Bianca di Imola' seeds that produce fruit, berries actually, about 6" long and 3/2" wide and most important, it ripens before its seeds have begun to form. You can figure out that if you want to have seeds for another summer, you will have to leave a few fruits on the plant until they are well past ripe. However, if they come from a hybrid plant, they won't necessarily come true, but it will be an interesting experiment.

Decades ago eggplant slices were salted and weighed down with a platter before being dipped in flour, beaten egg, and bread crumbs successively and fried, ostensibly to remove the bitterness. Modern hybrids do not seem to be bitter, but they may be if over ripe. Incidentally, eggplants of any color are ripe when you can press a dent into the shiny skin and they spring back. If the dent stays they are overripe and if you can't dent them easily they are unripe.

Eggplant is a relative of potato, *Solanum tuberosum*, and probably originated in India thousands of years ago. It has been documented in Europe in the 14<sup>th</sup> C. and arrived in the Americas in the 17<sup>th</sup>. Thomas Jefferson brought it to the US from France, called aubergine there. That should establish this underrated vegetable as a most Virginian thing to plant!

You could have a charming garden by planting a variety of these colorful fruits. 'Black Opal' has dark skin and creamy firm flesh that pickles well; for a container perhaps foot-high 'Bambino' would be fun. The large flowers are lavender followed by clusters of tiny deep purple fruits that can be harvested seven weeks after transplanting. There is 'Bride' for grilling and 'Ping Tung' for stir-fry and Thai red-curry. To decorate your perennial bed there is 'Turkish Orange'. This small fruit is best harvested at its green stage but can be left to turn a flaming red to brighten the garden. Do not eat them at the red stage as they are seedy and bitter, nor can you eat any eggplant raw. It can contain toxic solanine that is eliminated by cooking. Fiber and mineral rich, eggplant adds iron, protein, and potassium to your diet while being very low calorie.

Eggplant parmigiano is a familiar way to use them as is sliced into meatless lasagna. They are traditional in Ratatouille (fancy for stew or soup) that is the culinary solution when the garden is bursting with zucchini and tomatoes. Eggplant may be cubed with cauliflower as a side dish and in caponata as an chunky appetizer to load

onto crackers. For a dip for carrot sticks and such, mashed eggplant is delicious blended with tahini made from sesame seeds. The recipes for that combination can be found under 'baba ghanoush', aka 'baba ganouj'.

Raising eggplant is not difficult as it thrives here. Sandy loam is ideal: well-drained, moisture retentive soil of moderate fertility with a pH of 5.5- 6.8 can be enhanced with aged manure dug into the top six inches. Unless you have very acid soil you won't need lime. North of Virginia the plants have to be started inside and if you want a particular variety or an earlier harvest, seeds are the best option, started inside eight weeks before the last frost, about mid March. Once night temperatures do not go below 55 degrees it is time to plant outside,

They love it hot and sunny so if the night is going to be cold, cover them. Watering during the growing season is critical: too much water and the flowers won't set seed, too little and the leaves turn yellow, spotty and drop off. Pinching the center stalk when the plants are small will result in more branching, more fruit. You can use a little 4-8-4 fertilizer around each plant when setting them out and unless the plant looks unhealthy that should do it. If they are puny, side dress them with a little 10-10-10 monthly.

If harvesting is neglected during your week at the beach, remove the overripe fruit to the compost pile. If left on the plant it inhibits further production. And cut the fruit, do not pull it off! To prevent weeds, the removal of which can damage their shallow roots, mulch with straw once the soil has warmed and before the weather is hot.

As a precaution, don't plant eggplant near a black walnut tree. You may think that silly as you know they need sun, but those tree roots extend yards beyond the canopy. Vegetables in the solanaceous group- tomato, pepper, eggplant, potato- are particularly sensitive to juglone, the chemical exuded by the roots of the black walnut that inhibits growth. Bon appetite!