

For easier reference, buy the award-winning book, *The Family Kitchen Garden*

AUBERGINE

Solanum melongena – Nightshade Family

***, O, tender

Aubergines are not very difficult to grow, but the tricky bit is the weather since they like tropical and subtropical regions. We have had a good crop of outdoor plants in a hot summer, so in warmer parts of the British Islands it might be worth a try. A warm sunny patio would be ideal for growing them in pots.

SOIL AND POSITION

- Sunny, sheltered and a warm position – plants would appreciate some kind of windbreak.
- Well-drained fertile soil,

SOWING

- From March, under glass, 8-10 weeks before you expect the last frost.
- In modules or little pots on a warm windowsill.
- Seed can be stored for up to 4-5 years.

PLANTING AND SPACING

- Plant out after last frost in May.
- 60cm/24in between rows, 60cm/24in between plants.
- Mix two trowels of well-rotted garden compost or well-rotted manure into each hole while planting, alternatively rake 100g of blood, fish and bone per sqm into the bed.

AFTERCARE

- Regular watering.
- When the plants are about 20cm/8in tall, mulch with half-rotted compost or half-rotted manure.
- When flowering, gently shake the plants daily – it helps with pollination.
- Fertilize regularly with organic liquid tomato food after fruiting has started.
- Let only five fruits ripen per plant, pinch out any more flowers.

COMPANION PLANTING

- Spinach (intercropping while the aubergine plants are small), basil.

PROBLEMS

- Greenfly: Encourage ladybirds.

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TIME TO MATURITY

- About 5 months between sowing and harvesting.

HARVESTING

- When the fruits look nice and shiny – if they stay on the plant too long, the fruits become bitter.

USES

- Mediterranean staple: use grilled with feta, baba ganoush.

STORAGE

- Will stay fresh in the fridge for up to two weeks – but if it is cooler than 8°C, they get brown spots.

VARIETIES

There is a wide range of aubergines available; as well as the well-known purple ones there are white or striped varieties, also mini-aubergines for stir fries. The best thing is to go for early varieties which ripen quickly, like the ones below:

- Black Beauty: purple, abundant crops.
- Bonica F1: purple, reliable, large oval fruits, AGM.
- Calliope F1: stripy purple/white fruits, small.
- Mohican F1: small white fruits, AGM
- Ophelia F1: blackish-purple, mini-aubergine, fast-ripening.
- Violetta: purple, huge, tasty.