

VEGETABLE OF THE WEEK

EGGPLANT

Eggplant is a close relative of tomatoes, peppers and potatoes. They are smooth-skinned, oval to elongated, and range in color from white, to black to purple to pink! Eggplant requires the right kind of preparation; otherwise it can be unpleasantly bitter, rubbery, or watery.

To store: Wrap unwashed eggplant in a towel (not plastic) to absorb any moisture, and keep it in the veggie drawer of your refrigerator. Or store unrefrigerated at a cool room temperature. Use within a week and it should still be fresh and mild.

Handling: Eggplant is usually peeled. The flesh will brown when exposed to air. To prevent browning, coat in lemon juice or keep submerged in water. Rinse eggplant in cool water and cut off the stem. The shape of the eggplant determines how to prepare it: cut straight narrow eggplant into strips for grilling or broiling, and cut a rounded bulbous eggplant into cubes for stews and stir-fries. To remove bitter flavors and excess moisture, lightly salt Slices of eggplant and allow them to sit in a colander for 10-15 minutes. Gently squeeze out any liquid. Eggplant will now soak up less oil and need less salt in preparation.

To use: Stir-fry or sauté 1-inch cubed eggplant in a very hot sauté pan with peanut oil until the eggplant has released much of its water and is very soft. Or brush 1/2-inch to 1-inch slices of eggplant with olive oil or melted butter and broil or grill until brown. You can also pierce a whole eggplant in a few places with a knife, lightly coat with olive oil, and bake at 375 degrees until the eggplant is very soft and collapsed, 30-60 minutes.

To freeze: Peel and cut into slices 1/3-inch thick. To preserve color, soak 5 minutes in a solution of 4 T salt per gallon water — otherwise don't worry about it. Blanch for 2 minutes in steam. Cool immediately in cold water. Package in layers with each slice separated with two pieces of wrap.