

Vegetable with irresistible taste

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The eggplant (*Solanum melongena* L.) is a shrubby cultivated plant, a vegetable often present in the garden and on the table. It belongs to the family Solanaceae (*Solanaceae*). It is a close relative of the tomato and the potato and originates from India and Sri Lanka. Some people also call it "blue tomato". The species also occurs in a wild form, whose fruits are much smaller than those grown in the vegetable garden.

Eggplant is grown for its large hanging dark blue and purple to white fruits. There is a great diversity of varieties and forms. It is rich in minerals and vitamins and in nutritional value it is comparable to tomatoes. Among vegetable crops, eggplants are of particular interest because of their unusual taste. The bitterness of the pulp

gives a piquant note to dishes prepared from this plant product. Many people like the blue fruits because of their high content of vitamins and microelements.

Eggplant is rich in beneficial nutrients that support various aspects of health. Moreover, when prepared in an appropriate way, it can be a truly irresistibly tasty food. In some parts of the world, eggplant is called the “king of vegetables”, although technically speaking, eggplant is a fruit.

The cultivation of eggplant dates back more than 1500 years. In Sanskrit, literary references to eggplant have been found, dating from the 3rd century AD. The use of different types of eggplant is also documented in Chinese history in the period from the 7th to the 9th century AD. In a British book related to botany, eggplant appears in the 16th century. Later, with the development of trade routes, eggplant entered the cuisine of more and more countries.

During the Middle Ages in Europe, eggplant was considered an “exotic” overseas vegetable, which at that time was rarely eaten. It was only in the 15th and 16th centuries that Spain and Greece began to cultivate eggplants actively, and soon this vegetable spread throughout Europe.

Today there are dozens, even hundreds of different varieties and hybrids of eggplant, which differ in their shape, colour, taste and content of certain microelements.

The most widely grown varieties in Europe and North America nowadays are elongated egg-shaped fruits, 12–25 cm long and 6–9 cm wide, with dark purple skin. A much greater diversity of shapes, sizes and colours is cultivated in India and elsewhere in Asia. There, varieties that very much resemble a hen’s egg in size and shape are widespread. The colours range from white to yellow or green, as well as reddish-purple and dark purple. Some varieties have a colour gradient from white at the stem to light pink or deep purple or even black. There are also green or purple types with white stripes. Chinese eggplants are usually thinner and more elongated, like a slightly swollen “cucumber”.

Eggplant is rich in nutrients that have a beneficial effect on human health. It contains useful fibres, potassium, magnesium, vitamins C, K, B1, B6, iron, manganese, copper, folic acid, folate and antioxidants. Raw eggplant is low in fats, proteins and carbohydrates. Only manganese is present in higher amounts and provides 11% of the required daily intake. The darkening of its flesh is the result of oxidation of polyphenols, with chlorogenic acid being the most common phenolic compound in the fruits.

One hundred grams of eggplant contain 25 calories, 229 mg potassium, 1 g protein, 3% of the recommended daily dose of vitamin C, 1% of the daily dose of iron and another 5% of the desired amount of vitamin B6 for the day.

Eggplant is a rich source of phytonutrients, which have the ability to enhance cognitive abilities and improve overall brain health. Phytonutrients fight free radicals and supply the brain with blood enriched with more oxygen, thereby helping neural pathways to develop. This in turn improves memory and analytical thinking. Eggplant also contains potassium, which is likewise important for the proper functioning of the brain. It contains anthocyanin (a water-soluble compound that strengthens the central nervous system), **protects eye health and prevents the formation of cataracts**. The fibres it contains stimulate the secretion of gastric juices, which helps the body to digest food and the nutrients contained in it more easily.

Regular consumption of eggplant helps prevent osteoporosis, increases bone strength and also increases mineral density. The collagen in eggplant supports the formation of connective tissue and bones. The potassium in eggplant is responsible for better absorption of calcium, which is also very important for bone health.

Due to their high fibre content and low levels of soluble carbohydrates, eggplants are an ideal food for combating diabetes. Their properties make them useful as regulators of glucose and insulin activity in the body. When insulin levels are stable, strong fluctuations in blood sugar can be prevented, along with the potentially dangerous side of diabetes.

Together with the beneficial effect of fibres, eggplants increase the body's resistance to various diseases. They are excellent sources of antioxidants, one of the best lines of defence of the body against a wide range of diseases. They contain vitamin C, an important part of the immune system, as it stimulates the production and activity of white blood cells. Eggplant also contains manganese, a natural antioxidant and essential mineral.

Eggplant is used mainly as food, but it is also important for human health. Consumption of this vegetable maintains cholesterol levels in the body by increasing good and reducing bad cholesterol. Low levels of bad cholesterol significantly reduce the risk of heart attacks and atherosclerosis. Eggplant is also effective in regulating blood pressure, which relieves the cardiovascular system. Warmed fruit paste from it is used for the treatment of painful joints. A decoction of the leaves helps with open wounds and haemorrhages. Poultices from the leaves are applied in cases of burns, abscesses, herpes, etc. It should be borne in mind that the leaves are poisonous and are used only externally.

Despite its southern origin, eggplant is cold-tolerant, which facilitates its cultivation even in the conditions of the cool European climate. According to FAO data (2012), eggplant production is highly concentrated, with 90% of global output concentrated in 5 countries. The largest producer is China – 58%, followed by India with 25%, then Iran, Egypt and Turkey. Worldwide, 1,600,000 ha are planted with eggplant. In the top 10 eggplant-producing countries are China – 28,800,000 t, India – 12,200,000 t, Iran – 1,300,000 t, Egypt – 1,193,854 t, Turkey – 799,285 t, Indonesia – 518,827 t, Iraq – 460,000 t, Japan – 327,400 t, Spain – 246,600 t and Italy – 217,690 t. In Bulgaria in the same year, 2,237 decares were harvested with eggplant. The production obtained was 7,830 tonnes.

Today eggplant is present in many cuisines around the world. That is why there are plenty of diverse recipes for its preparation. Its skin is rich in many nutrients, so do not disregard it. Fried eggplants have an excellent taste, but they absorb more fat. For this reason, the better option for consumption is baked or stewed eggplant.

However beneficial eggplant may be, do not overdo it. As with everything in nutrition, balance is important here as well. Consumption of eggplant in large quantities could have some adverse effects on health. It contains a phytochemical called nasunin, which can bind to iron and remove it from the cells.