About – This member of the nightshade family is native to India and Sri Lanka. Eggplants are, in reality, fruits and their botanical classification is that of a berry. Thomas Jefferson is given credit for introducing America to the eggplant. Known as aubergine in Britain, the name eggplant developed from the particular variety that came from Europe, as it was white and resembled an egg.

While not one of the more popular vegetables in Western cuisine, the eggplant is an important food source in Asia and the Indian subcontinent. In fact, more than three-fourths of all eggplant comes from Asia. While the large oval-shaped purple eggplant is most common in America, there are numerous varieties of eggplant cultivated throughout the world - many of which are now available in local supermarkets. Based on shape, here are the basic categories:

Large Oval Fruit: The typical American eggplant would fall into this category, as do Sicilian and Italian eggplant. Eggplants in this general category are normally dark purple in color, but they can also be variegated in white and purple or even white. The skin is usually a bit tougher than other smaller varieties and there are more seeds.

Elongated Fruit: The Chinese and Japanese varieties would be examples of these eggplants. Again, elongated varieties can vary in color from white to purple, solid to variegated. These varieties are generally milder tasting, contain fewer seeds and have a thinner skin than the large oval varieties.

Ornamental Fruit: These would be the egg-shaped varieties similar to the early varieties found in Colonial times. They can vary in color from white to yellow with Asia, in particular India, producing varieties that are green, reddish-purple and purple as well.

Selection – Size is not an indicator of maturity. To test for maturity, press on the eggplant gently with your thumb. If the flesh bounces back when pressed, the eggplant is mature. If it is hard and does not yield to gentle pressure, it is immature, and if the indentation remains, it is over mature and may be brown inside, bitter and contain larger, tougher seeds. Eggplants bruise very easily, so they should be handled with great care. Avoid fruit that is shriveled or has brown spots.

Eggplants have a dimple near the blossom end of the fruit. Round-dimpled eggplants tend to be less meaty and will often have more seeds. Oval-dimpled eggplants seem to demonstrate the opposite characteristics, so always try to select fruit with an oval dimple.

Storage – Eggplant chills very easily. The ideal storage temperature is between 45 and 50 degrees. When purchasing eggplants, you should always plan to use them within one to two days. If you put eggplant in the refrigerator, be sure to wrap it in plastic or put it in a plastic bag. If you are going to use it the same day, leave it at room temperature.

Preparation and Uses – Eggplant is almost never eaten raw as the taste is very bitter, however, when cooked it develops a rich, complex flavor. The skin and seeds of the eggplant are edible though the skin of larger eggplants can be tough and it is recommended that they be peeled. When exposed to the air, the flesh discolors very rapidly (within minutes). Eggplant can be grilled, sautéed, baked or steamed. The flesh is capable of absorbing large quantities of sauces and oils. As a result, culinary creations, such as eggplant parmesan, become very rich and flavorful. Because of this absorbency, many cooks “degorge” eggplant prior to cooking. This involves cutting the eggplant into slices, salting the slices and letting them lay on a cloth or paper towel for 20 to 30 minutes. The slices are then pressed to remove the moisture. The salt is then rinsed off and the surfaces dried again with a paper or cloth towel prior to cooking.

Nutrition – From a nutritional standpoint, eggplant is rich in calcium and potassium. It is contains only 30 calories and 6 carbohydrates per one-cup serving. There are also trace amounts of protein and phosphorus present. Of some interest are studies that link eggplant to the possible reduction and control of cholesterol.

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