

The health benefits of the 'purple' veggie

By Mary Welch-Bezemek, R.D., Special to this Newspaper | Posted: Thursday, September 1, 2016 12:10 am

This week in the fruit and vegetable series we will look at the vegetable eggplant. The eggplant is usually distinguishable by its signature egg-like shape and vibrant purple color. When most people think of eggplant, this is the image that comes to mind. However, eggplants actually come in a variety of shapes and colors from small and oblong to long and skinny, from shades of purple to white and green.



Eggplant

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The first time I saw Thai and Japanese eggplants, I was surprised to see that they were round and vary in green and lavender color with a taste very

similar to the purple variety. No matter the name, shape, or color, all eggplants contain many beneficial nutrients and phytochemical compounds that benefit our health. This week we are going to focus on the nutritional benefits of the traditional purple eggplant.

Consuming fruits and vegetables of all kinds has long been associated with a reduced risk of many lifestyle-related health conditions. The fiber, potassium, vitamin C, vitamin B-6, and phytonutrient content in eggplants all support heart health.

Eggplants also contain flavonoids. According to the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition, eating foods containing flavonoids is affiliated with a lower risk of mortality from heart disease.

Flavonoids are present in many plant foods and in addition to providing health benefits; they also contribute to the distinguishable coloration of many fruits and vegetables. In this case they are water-soluble pigments that give the eggplant their well-known dark purple complexion.

Many of the nutritional benefits gained from consuming eggplants are obtained from the skin of the vegetable. Eggplant skin is full of fiber, potassium, magnesium and antioxidants. One cup of raw eggplant contains 20 calories, .8 grams of protein, 5 grams of carbohydrate, .15 grams of fat and 2.5 grams of dietary fiber. A one-cup serving meets 10 percent of daily fiber needs, 5 percent potassium, 3 percent vitamin C, 5 percent vitamin B-6, 1 percent iron and 2 percent magnesium.

Eggplants love warmth and grow best in very sunny, well-drained locations making Imperial County an ideal growing area. Raised beds that have been generously enriched with compost are

ideal, but any fertile soil will satisfy the plants. Eggplants grow into tall, angular plants, so they should be spaced 24 to 36 inches apart.

Be sure to keep plants watered or they will be small and bitter. They need a nice, steady supply of moisture but not so much that the soil is soggy. Drip systems or a soaker hose are ideal. Eggplants are prone to falling over when loaded with fruit, so you may want to tie plants to stakes to keep them upright.

The eggplant can taste bitter if picked when under-ripe or over-ripe, so knowing when to harvest is essential. A perfect eggplant will stop growing, have glossy skin, and contain well-formed yet immature seeds when you slice it open. Eggplants with no visible seeds are immature, and hard, dark seeds are found in overripe.

Use pruning shears to harvest the eggplant with a short stub of stem attached, because the plant will not pull free by hand. Rinse clean, pat dry and store in the refrigerator for several days. Eggplant discolors rapidly when cut open, so work quickly when preparing slices or skewers for grilling. Marinades that include salt, vinegar and/or lemon juice will keep cut pieces from darkening.

When buying eggplant choose those that are firm and somewhat heavy for their size. Just as in harvesting, be sure to choose plants with a smooth and glossy skin as well as an intense purple hue.

Eggplant can be prepared many ways and is delicious stuffed, fried, roasted and grilled. The skin should be left on when roasting or grilling, then once it is cooked let the vegetable cool and scoop out the flesh for serving. The eggplant should be peeled when preparing by other methods. Eggplant is great on pizza and eggplant parmesan is a must for a nutritious vegetarian dish. Eggplant is versatile, can stand in for meat in any recipe and they make filling and satisfying dishes. When you're in the grocery store, pick up an eggplant and give this vegetable a try.