

# Eggplant methods & ideas

From the Garlic Farm, West Granby, CT. By Nancy E. Dunn

Eggplant suffers from bad press. And from its fragile nature. Eggplant tastes best when it's very fresh, and when it's been picked at the right time. Eggplant left on the plant too long has bitter seeds. Old eggplant—off the plant too long—might also taste bitter, and it develops soft spots and brown spots and loses its beautiful glossy sheen. It's best when eaten only a few days out of the field. And it doesn't keep well uncooked in the fridge because it stores best at 45 to 65 degrees F. and 60% humidity, conditions that we can rarely offer at home. In a pinch you can keep it for two or three days in the refrigerator.

For best results, buy the freshest eggplant you can find (like ours, fresh out of the field this morning), leave it on the counter if you plan to cook it today or tomorrow, and grill it or bake it this weekend if you want to use it later during the week in a recipe. Once it's cooked, it keeps well for several days in the refrigerator, and you can then quickly put together a dish based on your prepped eggplant. Besides, you'll feel virtuously well organized.

Some cooked eggplant dishes, such as ratatouille, keep well in the freezer for up to three months.

## Basic cooking advice

Eggplant is one of the few vegetables that don't taste great al dente. You'll want to cook it thoroughly till it's soft and silky in texture.

Peel or partially peel or leave the skin on, as you wish. The skin is tougher than the flesh, but lots of people like the contrast of tender and chewy textures.

Most traditional recipes (such as eggplant parmigiana and ratatouille) call for cooking eggplant in olive oil, and, because it's so spongy in texture, it soaks up a lot of oil unless you take precautions.

Reducing eggplant's absorbency is one reason many experts call for salting and sweating the eggplant before cooking to draw out the moisture in the eggplant chunks and reducing its porosity. They also recommend the sweating step to reduce bitterness, but that's not a factor with fresh eggplant that's not overripe. So you can skip this step if you have fresh, sweet eggplant that you're not planning to fry. If you feel the need to salt & sweat eggplant, the summer 2011 issue of *Cook's Illustrated* offers a great shortcut method that uses the microwave oven: Cut eggplant

into half-inch cubes, toss with salt (1 tsp. for 1½ lbs, or about 7 cups), put a couple of coffee filters on a microwaveable plate, top with the salted eggplant, and microwave to 10 minutes. Then sauté the chunks for your recipe without fear of soaking up lots of oil.

## Lots more recipes & links to recipes

[GarlicFarmCT.com/recipes-eggplant.html](http://GarlicFarmCT.com/recipes-eggplant.html)

## Quick eggplant cooking, with minimal fat

Grilling or roasting eggplant concentrates its flavor and sweetness, as with any other veggie.

### Grill or broil

Slice into half-inch rounds or slabs, brush both sides with a tasty oil, sprinkle with salt & pepper or a seasoning mixture you like, and cook till soft, turning once. Half-inch slabs ought to take under 5 minutes a side on a grill (covered if it's a gas grill). Watch them carefully if you broil them in your oven; the time depends upon how hot your broiler is and how close you place the eggplant to the heat source.

Use thicker or thinner slabs, adjusting the time accordingly. Inch-thick slabs take about 12 to 14 minutes under the broiler, turning once. Thin slabs cook more quickly, and you can roll them up around something else yummy, such as sausage halves that you've grilled, or a smear of herbed goat cheese from Sweet Pea Cheese. I prefer to leave the peel on when I'm grilling; the sturdy peel gives the slices a little more body, which helps when moving them around.

### Bake or roast

Preheat the oven to 450 degrees F.

Slice half-inch slices lengthwise, crosswise or diagonally on the bias. Brush both sides lightly with oil, sprinkle with salt or a seasoning mixture. Arrange on a large baking sheet and roast till tender and browned, about 20 to 25 minutes.

Serve this eggplant as is for an appetizer or side dish, or use it as the base for another dish, such as moussaka or eggplant parmigiana. You can also combine the cooked eggplant with sautéed onions and other vegetables to start off a frittata or fill an omelette or crêpe. Or use it as a pizza topping, along with some feta cheese, sautéed onions and peppers, and tomato slices.

**Tips:** When preparing to brush on oil, dampen the brush slightly before dipping it into the oil. The brush then releases the oil more readily. Use an oil infused with herbs or garlic for more flavor.