

# Heirloom Eggplant Varieties in Florida<sup>1</sup>

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Eggplant (*Solanum melongena*) is a member of the nightshade family *Solanaceae* (Rindels, 1997). It is called “eggplant” because the original plant produced small, oval-shaped white fruit that resembled an egg. Eggplant is native to India and Pakistan, and it was first domesticated more than 4,000 years ago (Khan, 1979). Ancient Chinese records indicate that eggplant was cultivated in China as early as the first century BC (Wang et al., 2008), and the Chinese crossbred varieties with different shapes and colors. The migration of the eggplant continued toward the Middle East and westward to Egypt during the 9th to 12th centuries AD (Bowman, 2010). The Moors introduced eggplant to the Spanish, and the fruit became popular in Europe. The Spanish believed that eggplant was an aphrodisiac and called it *berengenas* or “the apple of love.” The eggplant’s popularity took a downward turn in northern Europe after Albert of Cologne referred to the fruit as *mala insana* or “mad apples,” because it was thought to cause insanity when eaten. By the 1600s, however, several varieties migrated from Naples, Italy, to Germany. While the Spanish were traveling the globe, they took the eggplant to South America around 1650. In 1806, Thomas Jefferson (well-known for his promotion of horticulture) introduced the eggplant to the United States after receiving the fruit from a friend in France.

Eggplants belong to the same family of plants as tomato, tobacco, and pepper, and eggplants are susceptible to many of the same diseases that affect these plants. Viruses such as tobacco mosaic virus and tomato mosaic virus can be a common problem. Typically, these viral infections cause

stunted plants, fruit and leaf malformation, mottling, and leaf mosaics. Definitive identification can only be made by a diagnostics lab, and once infected, these viral diseases can no longer be controlled (Mossler et al., 2012). Immediate removal of infected plants and control of weeds and insects is critical to prevent the spread of these diseases.

Hybrid eggplants are produced from two genetically different purebred varieties. The offspring are selected for certain characteristics, such as resistance to viruses and other desirable characteristics. However, these plants will not produce offspring identical to themselves, thus the original cross must be made each year (Delahaut and Newenhouse, 1997). As opposed to the modern-day hybrid cultivars, heirlooms are old cultivars generated by handing down seeds from generation to generation. In order to be considered an heirloom, the eggplant variety must be true-to-type, open-pollinated, and it must be in use for at least 50 years. This means that pollination occurs by insects, birds, wind, or any other natural means, and the plants produced will be identical to the parent plant. Although heirlooms are not selected for traits such as disease resistance, they are usually selected for superior flavor, color, and texture. Because heirlooms are true-to-type, they will have consistent traits from one generation to the next; therefore, the seeds can be saved and regrown the following year.

## Heirloom Eggplant Varieties

The following is a guide of heirloom eggplant varieties—from most to least popular—used in Florida (Table 1). The popularity was determined by a survey of seed suppliers,

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which included Baker Seeds, Burpee, High Mowing Seeds, Southern Exposure Seed Exchange, Tomato Grower Supply Company, Seeds of Change, Territorial Seed Company, and My Patriot Supply. When organic seeds were available, the USDA logo was inserted.

## References

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Table 1. Heirloom Eggplant Varieties for Florida

Variety	Company	Season (Relative Maturity)	Plant and Fruit Characteristics	Comments
<b>Most Popular Heirloom Varieties</b>				
 <b>Black Beauty</b> Credits: Burpee	Annie's Heirloom Seeds, Baker Creek Heirloom Seed Company, Burpee, and Southern Exposure Seed Exchange	74–90 days	Plants yield large glossy, black, plump, and slightly lobed fruit of excellent quality. Plants produce up to 15 fruit per unit that grows about 6.5 inches by 5 inches and may weigh up to 3 lb.	Fruit is standard, old type, and beautiful with lavender blossoms. This variety can be grown at the flower garden. The rich-flavored fruits with tender skin are perfect for grilling. Organic seeds available. 
 <b>Fengyuan Purple</b> Credits: Baker Creek Heirloom Seed Company	Reimer Seeds, Sweet Corn Organic Nursery, Tomato Growers Supply Company, and Baker Creek Heirloom Seed Company	65 days	Plants produce an abundance of very long, slender, fruit that has very thin, purple skin and creamy, white flesh.	This is a unique Taiwanese variety and is one of the best long varieties. It is drought tolerant; fruit is sweet and mellow tasting, and excellent for pickling. The fruit is easy to grow and wonderful for grilling or adding to stir-fries. Organic seeds available. 
 <b>Listada de Gandia</b> Credits: High Mowing Organic Seeds	Baker Creek Heirloom Seed Company, High Mowing Organic Seeds, and Local Harvest	75 days	Plants grow 24–30 inches tall and 12–18 inches in diameter. Plants bear 5- to 6-inch-long fruit that is a purple color and has irregular white stripes.	Plants are drought tolerant. This is an Italian variety. Organic seeds available. 
 <b>Long Purple</b> Credits: Burpee	Burpee, My Patriot Supply, and Sustainable Seed Company	70–80 days	Plants are 24–30 inches tall and produce dark purple fruit that is 8–10 inches long.	This is an Italian variety that produces good yields of mild fruit. Organic seeds available. 
 <b>Ping Tung Long</b> Credits: High Mowing Organic Seeds	Reimer Seeds, Baker Creek Heirloom Seed Company, High Mowing Organic Seeds, and Southern Exposure Seed Exchange	65 days	Plants are high yielding and produce more than 20 shiny, deep-lavender fruits that have white flesh and grow 2 inches by 11 inches and longer.	Fruit has a mild flavor, and plants are stress tolerant. Organic seeds available. 
 <b>Rosa Bianca</b> Credits: High Mowing Organic Seeds	Baker Creek Heirloom Seed Company, High Mowing Organic Seeds, and Southern Exposure Seed Exchange	73–83 days	Plants are similar to 'Listada de Gandia' with a creamy white color and pink-purple irregular stripes that radiate from the top.	Plants grow best in areas with warm nights. Plants have lower yields in extreme northern areas. Organic seeds available. 

Variety	Company	Season (Relative Maturity)	Plant and Fruit Characteristics	Comments
 <b>Rosita</b> Credits: Reimer Seeds	Reimer Seed and Baker Creek Heirloom Seed Company	80 days	Plants produce an excellent yield of 8-inch by 4-inch, lavender-pink fruit with white flesh.	Fruit is mild and very sweet. Organic seeds available. 
<b>Other heirloom varieties</b>				
 <b>Apple Green</b> Credits: Reimer Seeds	Baker Creek Heirloom Seed Company and Rare Seeds	70 days	Early-maturing and small plants that produce good yields of smooth, oval-round fruit that grow to 3 inches by 2.5 inches.	Fruit is very tender and delicious with an extremely mild flavor. Fruit is highly recommended and is an excellent variety for northern U.S. regions. Organic seeds available. 
 <b>Aswad</b> Credits: Baker Creek Heirloom Seed Company	Baker Creek Heirloom Seed Company and Smart Gardener	75–85 days	Plants are 24–36 inches tall and produce dark purple-black fruit that is 12–15 inches in size and can weigh 3 lb. or more.	Plants are heat tolerant. Fruit flesh is sweet and tender. Organic seeds available. 
 <b>Casper Eggplant</b> Credits: Reimer Seeds	Sustainable Seed Company, New Hope Seed Company, Local Harvest, Organic Sanctuary, and Territorial Seed Company	70 days	Plants are compact and produce an abundance of ivory white, oval-shaped, early ripening fruit. Fruit grow 5–7 inches long.	Fruit is very flavorful, delicious skinned, and mild fleshed. Originated in France. It is perfect for gourmet dishes and is best eaten when small at the 5- to 7-inch stage. Organic seeds available. 
 <b>Diamond</b> Credits: Reimer Seeds	Annie's Heirloom Seeds, Reimer Seeds, and Baker Creek Heirloom Seed Company	65–95 days	Larger plants are fairly prolific and produce clusters of 4–6 fruit. Fruit are 6–9 inches long and 2–3 inches in diameter. Fruit is dark purple and glossy.	Plants do well in drought conditions and are an excellent choice for cooler areas. Fruit is wonderful for roasting and has a mild-tasting flesh with excellent firm texture. Organic seeds available. 
 <b>Florida High Bush</b> Credits: Reimer Seeds	Sustainable Seed, Reimer Seeds, and Seed Savers Exchange	75–85 days	Vigorous and upright plants produce shiny, oval-to-oblong fruit that grow 10 inches in length, and are high off of the ground.	Plants are drought resistant.

Variety	Company	Season (Relative Maturity)	Plant and Fruit Characteristics	Comments
 <p><b>Florida Market</b> Credits: Reimer Seeds</p>	Baker Creek Heirloom Seed Company and Reimer Seeds	85 days	Very prolific, large plants that produce large, glossy, and dark purple bell-shaped fruit.	An old standard market variety and an excellent type for the South. Fruit is almost resistant to sunscald.
 <p><b>Japanese White Egg</b> Credits: Baker Creek Heirloom Company</p>	Burpee and Baker Creek Heirloom Seed Company	72 days	Compact plants that produce small, white fruit the size of a hen's egg.	Fruit is perfect for stir-frying.
 <p><b>Little Fingers</b> Credits: High Mowing Organic Seeds</p>	High Mowing Organic Seeds and Baker Creek Heirloom Seed Company	65 days	Fruit is produced in clusters on sturdy, compact plants. Fruit is blunt-ended, slender, and more petite than the standard eggplant with thin, tender, and dark purple skin. Flesh has a silky texture with few seeds.	The fruit may be harvested when finger-sized and glossy, but it may also be allowed to grow larger with no alteration in the mild, sweet taste and tender texture. Organic seeds available.
 <p><b>Louisiana Long Green</b> Credits: Burpee</p>	Burpee, Baker Creek Heirloom Seed Company, and Southern Exposure Seed Exchange	70 days	Spineless plants average 42 inches in height and produce attractive, 7- to 10-inch, light green, and banana-shaped fruit.	Fruit has a mild flavor with no bitterness. Organic seeds available.
 <p><b>Pandora Striped Rose</b> Credits: Reimer Seeds</p>	Azure Dandelion, Reimer Seeds, and Baker Creek Heirloom Seed Company	75–80 days	Plants are 24–30 inches tall and 12–18 inches in diameter. Plants produce raindrop-shaped fruit with lilac-rose color and white stripes.	Plants are drought tolerant.
 <p><b>Prosperosa</b> Credits: Baker Creek Heirloom Seed Company</p>	Baker Creek Heirloom Seed Company, Territorial Seed Company, and Tomato Growers Supply Company	75 days	Plants produce pleated, deep-purple fruit with white tops that grow to 4–5 inches.	Italian variety that produces mild-flavored fruit.



Variety	Company	Season (Relative Maturity)	Plant and Fruit Characteristics	Comments
 <p><b>Rayada</b> Credit: Baker Creek Heirloom Seed Company</p>	<p>Baker Creek Heirloom Seed Company and Smart Gardener</p>	<p>80 days</p>	<p>Plants bear fruit 5 inches by 3 inches that are mainly purple with white stripes.</p>	<p>White fruit is mild and sweet.</p>
 <p><b>Rotonda Bianca</b> Credits: Baker Creek Heirloom Seed Company</p>	<p>Local Harvest and Baker Creek Heirloom Seed Company</p>	<p>120 days</p>	<p>Plants are 24–36 inches tall and produce round, white fruit that are shaded with a rose-pink color.</p>	<p>Fruit has great flavor and texture.</p>
 <p><b>Round Mauve</b> Credits: Reimer Seeds</p>	<p>Seed Savers Exchange, Reimer Seeds, and Baker Creek Heirloom Seed Company</p>	<p>60–70 days</p>	<p>Plants are 22–26 inches tall and 12–18 inches in diameter, and they produce 3- to 4-inch-long dark purple fruit.</p>	<p>This is an early variety, and plants are drought tolerant.</p>
 <p><b>Thai Long Green</b> Credits: Reimer Seeds</p>	<p>Local Harvest, Evergreen Seeds, Seed Savers Exchange, Reimer Seeds, and Baker Creek Heirloom Seed Company</p>	<p>85 days</p>	<p>Short, 24-inch-tall plants that are spineless or have a soft spine. Fruit are light green and 1.5 inches by 10 inches long. Flowers are deep lavender with green and soft spineless calyxes.</p>	<p>Plants are able to withstand light frosts. Organic seeds available.</p> 