



# A PURPLE PASSION

by Irene Virag

ONE NICE THING about gardening is that it puts you in touch with new experiences. Some of them are yucky, like tomato cutworms and verticillium wilt and mugwort. Others are rewarding, like compost and bulbs and butterfly bushes.

And eggplants.

I'm unburdening my heart here. This is my ode to eggplants. When it comes to homegrown vegetables, I've always had a thing for tomatoes and I'm quite fond of lettuce, especially red leaf and romaine. I'm not fickle - I still care about them. But this season I'm in love with eggplants. The way they look, the way they cook, the whole ratatouille.

I guess the romance began last winter with seed catalogs. They're full of flowery moments, especially when it comes to vegetables. And eggplants seem made for poets. Even the variety names smack of Harlequin romances - Rosa Bianca, Black Beauty, Asian Bride, Purple Blush, Bambino. Just listen to the passion Shepherd's Garden Seeds lavishes on Rosa Bianca: "The rounded, plump teardrop-shaped fruits slowly emerge from their blossom casings forming heavy globes in delicate shades of rosy lavender and soft white . . . Best of all their pretty flesh is delicious." Or catch this paean to Italian Pink Bi-Color in Seeds of Change: "Skin is a creamy, purple-lavender, overlaid with rose-pink vertical stripes. Flesh is sweet and tender."

Couldn't you just swoon?

I couldn't resist. I ordered several varieties of the vegetable that belongs to the nightshade family, which also includes tomatoes, and is more formally known as *Solanum melongena* - Agora, a vigorous hybrid; Rosa

Bianca, an Italian heirloom; and Black Beauty, a widely grown standard.

Eggplants have been around for ages - Sanskrit writings indicate they originated in India. They spread into China and the Near East, and then into the fields and kitchens of Spain and Italy. Americans were a little backward about eggplants. At the start of the 19th Century, only about three varieties were known to U.S. seed companies. It wasn't until 1902 that we went to market with an American variety - Black Beauty.

It wasn't as if I'd never tried growing eggplants before. I'd put a few plants near the tomatoes in a small vegetable garden in my backyard. The tomatoes flourished along with squash and peas and lettuce and arugula - but the eggplants never excited me. They produced flowers but not much fruit and nothing bigger than a baseball. None of the pendulous heavy globes or sensual pear shapes I'd been led to expect.

But this year, I had another site in mind - the sun-drenched vegetable beds in our new and enriched front-yard garden. Maybe it was my fault. Maybe I just wasn't ready for eggplants. This time, I would bring more to the relationship. More sun and better dirt. Only, it wasn't that easy. If I was ready, the new garden was not. It wasn't ready for planting until the beginning of July. By that time, the eggplants I'd started from seed indoors had withered away.

Instead, I found some seedlings in a nearby nursery. They were all Black Beauty, which is actually dark purple. I've always loved the color purple. I planted them in beds with tomatoes and Swiss chard. And as time went by, I realized that this was the real thing. Romance flowered and flourished. There was no way I could not be proud of my eggplants.

The seedlings grew straight and tall with strong stalks and big green leaves. By August, they were flowering. Or as I confided to my diary on Aug. 3, "there are lavender blossoms galore." Then the fruit came. It was ready for picking by early September. My vegetable garden is strictly organic and my eggplants showed no signs of *Solanum melongena's* worst enemies - flea beetles and verticillium wilt.

It's been a glorious yield. Love's labor was not lost on my eggplants - each bush bore several beauties. Big, curving black-purple eggplants with the sheen of summer in their skins. Eggplants are easily as voluptuous as Bartlett pears and butternut squash. And they not only delight the senses, but, like same-day corn and just-picked strawberries, they satisfy the soul. Nurtured by pouring sunshine, regular watering, composted soil, constant weeding and plenty of mulch, mine were luscious as well as lustrous.

Their flesh was creamy white, just as the catalogs promised. On the plate, they were strong but tender. It's not as if I'd never eaten eggplant before. It wasn't my first time. In the carefree days when I didn't have to worry about cholesterol, I flirted with eggplant parmigiana. Occasionally, I used eggplant in my tomato sauce.

Now I use my eggplants as well as Swiss chard as a staple with pasta and I make a modified ratatouille (modified because the vegetable gardener I live with is allergic to garlic). I stuff eggplants with sauteed mushrooms, tomatoes, zucchini and ground turkey. I grill eggplants. I bake eggplants. I puree eggplants. I read that you can freeze eggplants, and I'm trying that so I don't have to spend the winter in longing.

The season is just about over but I can still see my eggplants - I have photos of them with their purple majesty heightened by tomatoes in the green basket I use when I pick my vegetables. I'm keeping the romance going by planning next season's seed orders. I'll definitely plant Rosa Bianca and Agora. Maybe I'll try a new pure white called Snowy. And I'll never forget Black Beauty.

In the garden of my mind, eggplants are forever.





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