

# How to grow Aubergines from Seeds.

Although tomatoes and aubergines are closely related, aubergines - also known as eggplants - are going to require significantly warmer conditions than tomatoes in order to produce a significant crop. If you intend growing them outdoors then you will need - even in the South of England - a sheltered position and some form of protection to help get them off to a good start.

As a native to the areas of India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka they will need as much help as they can get when it comes to 'mimicking' acceptable growing conditions - especially when grown in a northern European climate. Not only are aubergines going to need higher temperatures they are also going to need protection from wind. And while tomatoes will happily ripen four to six trusses of fruit when grown outside, you need to limit the number of fruits on an aubergine plant so that the fruit that is left will get the best opportunity to ripen. There is no point allowing the plant to expend energy into producing fruit that has no chance of ripening by the end of the growing season.

Aubergine seeds can be sown anytime from February to April, but if they are to be grown unprotected outside - i.e. not in a greenhouse or polytunnel - it would be best to start them off indoors to give them as much of a head start as possible. Sow the seed into pots or plug trays using a good quality seed compost such as John Innes seed and cutting. Sow thinly and then cover with a layer of fine compost. Firm the compost down gently, keep moist, then cover with a sheet of glass, polythene or propagator lid in order to maintain a high humidity. The seeds should then be kept in a warm, bright position at a temperature of approximately 18 -21 degrees Celsius. Remove the cover as soon as the seedlings begin to show through the compost, and once they reach a height of about 6 inches they can be transplanted into individual pots using a good quality free draining compost. Allow them to continue growing and be ready to transplant them in to grow-bags, in the ground or in large pots under protection in May once the threat of frosts are over.



While growing, keep the young plants moist and weed free and they may require the additional support of canes or an open wigwam. Feed them with a high potash liquid fertilizer at one quarter the recommended strength - but apply it at four times the recommended frequency. Also pinch out the top of the plant when it gets to about 18 inches high to encourage it to bush out. However, once you have three or four fruits set, it will be time to start removing any further side shoots as they develop. This helps to divert the energy of the plant to where it is most needed.

One last cultivation point, to ensure a good set of fruit when the plants first come into flower you can consider giving them a little extra help by pollinating them by hand. This will not be necessary for the subsequent sets of flowers.

In hot weather you may need to water twice a day, which is why it is important to pot them on into a free draining compost. Aubergines can be incredibly thirsty and dry compost will quickly lead to a check in growth. Having a free draining composts allows you to water as much as the plant requires without the risk of root damage through water-logging. This applies particularly to plants grown in a greenhouse where it can get very hot - even in late summer.