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EGGPLANT VARIETY TRIALS 2013

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2013 Eggplant Variety Trial

The number of eggplant varieties available to market growers has increased dramatically in recent years. While standard black Italian-style eggplants still dominate the wholesale market, the direct retail market now includes a wide range of shapes and sizes, and all shades of purple as well as black and white. A survey of the seed catalogs targeting commercial growers in New England shows 65 distinct eggplant varieties available for 2014. In 2013 we trialed 9 varieties at the Gardiner Crops Research farm at URI.

Eggplant is native to tropical Asia and eastern Africa, and is a traditional crop in hot-summer areas from southern Europe through the Middle East to India, China, Japan, and Southeast Asia. Hybrid varieties are widely adapted, but they are sensitive to cold, and particularly to cold, wet soil. In New England eggplants are best grown in raised beds with black plastic or other soil-warming mulch. The URI trial was grown from transplants, which were planted into raised beds with plastic mulch and drip tape in early June. Plants were individually staked but not pruned. Flea beetle, Japanese beetle, and Colorado potato beetle caused some damage but never enough to require pesticides. There were no significant disease problems. Fruits were hand-harvested every 5-8 days from August 1 through October 23, and graded into marketable fruit and culls. Scarring was the most frequent reason for culling fruit, followed by over-maturity.

Most of the entries in the trial were standard medium-fruited Italian type eggplants. Calliope is a small-fruited Asian type suited for harvest as either baby or mature fruit; we harvested mature fruit. Orient Express is an oriental type with long, curved fruit.

Traviata yielded the most fruit, almost 15 per plant. The traditional black, bell-shaped fruit averaged 0.72 lbs. Plants were short and very bushy, with abundant branches. Most culls occurred late in the season and were a result of scarring where fruits rubbed against branches. The open-pollinated, organic variety **Diamond** produced a similar number of fruit and fewer culls. The medium-sized fruit are not particularly dense so weight is low, but the cylindrical shape is perfect for slicing. **Classic** and **Falcon** were lower-yielding than Traviata, and produced fewer fruit than Diamond but were otherwise similar. The white-fruited variety **Clara** produced the largest fruit, and was a heavy yielder. However, the fruit developed brown marks in response to even the slightest injury, so cull rates were high – and would have been even higher if we had declared only blemish-free fruit to be marketable. Clara also had more flea beetle damage than any of the other varieties. **Orient Express** was the earliest variety, producing the highest yields on the first two harvest dates. It continued to produce throughout the season, but the long fruits scarred very easily and cull rates were high. **Dancer** produced beautiful bright purple fruits during the main season. Fruit size and shape were similar to Diamond, but Dancer started fruiting later, and color deteriorated under the cooler conditions later in the season. **Beatrice** is a round, slightly lobed medium purple Italian-style eggplant. Yields were moderate and most culls were distorted fruit. However, Beatrice has very thin skin and fruit wilted more quickly than the other varieties. **Calliope** was very pretty at the baby stage, with clusters of shiny purple-and-white striped fruit. However, it went from mature to over mature very quickly, and deteriorated rapidly late in the season. The fruit are also very dense, almost hard – a rather different texture from the other varieties. Calliope could be successful in the right market, but finding that market may be challenging.

Variety	Fruit Color	Fruit Shape	Fruit Size (lbs)	Yield per Plant		
				Fruit Count	Weight (lbs)	Culls (%)
Calliope	varigated	oval	0.65	8.13	5.38	3.9
Falcon	black	long oval	0.84	10.06	8.17	6.8
Diamond	deep purple	cylindrical	0.54	14.29	7.32	7.0
Traviata	black	bell	0.72	14.92	10.70	16.5
Beatrice	medium purple	round lobed	0.84	10.50	8.04	6.7
Orient Express	black	scimitar	1.06	7.00	5.99	30.0
Dancer	bright purple	long oval	0.53	9.03	4.80	7.7
Classic	black	bell	1.00	10.24	10.11	8.1
Clara	white	bell	1.16	10.74	11.80	17.7