

High Tunnel Report-2012

Fried eggplant, sautéed eggplant, roasted eggplant, eggplant parmesan, eggplant caviar, ratatouille, baba ganouj... you name a possible way to prepare eggplant and someone on the High Tunnel Team has eaten eggplant prepared that way at some point this summer and some of us even have bags of frozen eggplant in our freezers for eating this winter!

One of our research projects of the SMB CSUE Office in is a small production moveable High Tunnel greenhouse at the Norwood Community Garden. 10 Colorado Master Gardeners have worked on this project at some point in the last year.

Our high tunnel is an 18' x 24' moveable, unheated greenhouse used for season extension. We want to demonstrate by growing in it what we can do in our high altitude short season area. For our first trial we decided on Solanaceae (tomato family) crops with companions. We chose a pretty finicky crop for our first trail—eggplants! We trailed 3 short season varieties: 'Ping Tung', 'Apple Green' and 'Japanese White'. We also grew sunberries, sometimes called wonder berries, an heirloom fruiting plant bred by famous horticulturist Luther Burbank. And we grew 3 varieties of sweet red peppers: 'Carmen', 'Karlo' and 'Gypsy'. As a companion plant we grew basil. All of these are warm season crops.

This article is going to focus on the eggplants. Other articles this winter will cover the other crops and the results of our trials.

Eggplants are tender annuals, native to India. They require temperatures above 50 degrees day and night and below 95 to 100 degrees and 80+ days to grow and produce well. Temperatures outside that range can stunt the plants and even stop their production. They are a 'super food' that contain one of the most powerful antioxidants known.

In our area we can get night temperatures below 50 even in the summer and our frost occurs before these plants set and produce much fruit. So, growing them in the warmer microclimate of the high tunnel enabled us to plant them 2 weeks before our last frost and continue for a while after our first frost in the fall. This greatly increased the yields we have gotten grown outdoors without protection.

We harvested over 500, 2-4" 'Japanese white' eggplants. The common comment was "Now I know why they are called eggplants!". These were best sautéed or fried but not roasted. We harvested over 300 'Apple Green' eggplants. These are best harvested at 4-6" and were best prepared by roasting but were good fried or sautéed. We didn't get very many 'Ping Tung' eggplants a 12" x 2" sausage like pale purple eggplant. The 'Ping Tung' eggplants we did harvest were not as good as the other two varieties.

We all ate eggplants, froze eggplants, sold eggplants at the Norwood Farm and Craft Market, donated them to the San Miguel Regional food banks in Norwood and Telluride, gave eggplants to everyone we could and sadly, even composted eggplants.

Now we know we can grow this finicky crop in our area and increase our yields if we choose short season varieties and use Season Extension like a High Tunnel.