

# ASPARAGUS

## *ASPARAGUS OFFICINALIS*

Asparagus has become one of the most popular home garden vegetables, and for very good reasons. Expensive to buy at the supermarket, it is relatively easy to grow, and you can plant this perennial once and harvest early each spring for years.

Asparagus is the earliest vegetable that can be grown and harvested from the garden, and it thrives in most areas of the United States. Ideal climates are cold enough in winter to freeze the soil a few inches deep. (Asparagus does not thrive in the Deep South states of Florida, Louisiana, and Alabama.)

A plot 20 feet square or a row 50 to 60 feet long will keep a family of five or six well supplied with fresh asparagus.

### **Preparing the soil**

When planting asparagus you are building the foundation for many years of production; take the time to work the soil a foot or more deep, adding plenty of organic matter. As you work the soil, apply 4 to 5 pounds of 5-10-10 fertilizer per 100 square feet.

Asparagus can be grown from seed, but is usually started with one-year-old crowns planted in late spring. This not only saves time, but also ensures vigor and productivity. Crowns are available from garden centers and seed companies. Select large, well-grown crowns that have many roots. Thinly rooted crowns are a common cause of weak plants. Roots must not be allowed to wither or dry out before planting.

Asparagus roots spread wide; dig trenches 4 to 5 feet apart and 8 inches deep. Spread some compost, manure, or other organic matter in the bottom of the trench and cover it with an inch of garden soil.

Set the crowns 18 inches apart in the row and cover with 2 inches of soil. As the new shoots come up, gradually fill in the trench. Water generously when the tops are developing.

To encourage heavy top growth and thick spears, follow a twice-a-year feeding program. Make one application before growth starts in the spring and a second as soon as the harvest is done.

No cutting should be done the first year and only a few stalks should be cut the second year. This way the plant develops copious fern-like foliage, which in turn builds up a large reserve of energy in the roots. (Note: If two-year-old roots are available in your area, they still require this 2-year establishment period.)

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The third year after planting, the asparagus should give you 4 full weeks of cutting. Early in the season, shoots may require cutting only every third day, but as the weather warms and growth becomes faster, it may be necessary to harvest twice a day.

Asparagus may be blanched by mounding organic mulch over the beds as the spears are developing. To harvest, cut or snap off the spears when 6 to 8 inches high. A handy tool for cutting is an asparagus knife. Snapping—bending the spear over until it breaks—avoids injury to other shoots below ground. Break as low as possible.

#### Varieties

Choose rust-resistant varieties. These include 'Mary Washington', a thick, straight, dark green variety tinged with purple at the tips; 'Waltham Washington', it is an improved hybrid descendant that has higher resistance to rust than its parent; and 'California 500', which will produce early, tender spears without winter frost, although it does not tolerate high summer heat.

#### How to use

Young, fresh asparagus is excellent raw. Slice thinly on the diagonal for salads, or serve it on relish trays with sauces or sour cream dips. Asparagus may also be pickled.

Nothing destroys the appearance and taste of asparagus like overcooking. As Nero said, "Execute them faster than you cook asparagus." Spears should be cooked until flexible but never soft (5 to 15 minutes, depending upon size). For small portions use a steamer basket; for larger amounts tie into bunches and stand upright in a special asparagus cooker, a coffeepot, or an inverted double boiler.