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# Asparagus

## STEP-BY-STEP PLANTING ASPARAGUS

Perennial to a fault, an established bed of *Asparagus officinalis* will produce its early harvest two years after planting, for two decades and more. Eventually, it grows stingier and weedier with each passing spring. To assure a good yield, don't wait for the inevitable decline; it's more satisfying to plant anew every 10 to 12 years.

Asparagus is very cold hardy and can be grown in most temperate climates across the US and Canada. In cooler climates, plant in early spring, as soon as the ground is crumbly and ready to work. This tender green vegetable flourishes in sandy loam with a neutral or nearly neutral pH. Asparagus tolerates salt but needs full sun, good drainage, and some protection from wind. Give it a permanent bed, away from the annual vegetable garden.

### Selecting

Be sure to buy fresh ones: they should look crisp, not wrinkly. The succulent, whitish crowns bear eyes on the upside and brittle roots, like a day lily's.

### Planting

Prepare the ground before acquiring plants. Dig the soil to a depth of about 1½ feet. Then remove enough soil to make a trench 6 inches deep; put the excess 6 inches off to one side. Work generous amounts (according to your garden soil's specific needs) of finished compost or well-rotted animal manure (horse, goat, cow, or sheep) into the bottom foot of the trenches. For every three bushels of such organic enrichments, mix in about three pounds of a 5-10-10 fertilizer. Rake out the sunken, improved beds to a fair tilth and let them settle a few days. Add more soil, if settling is dramatic: the shallow beds should be about six inches deep at planting time.

Lay out rows no wider than 3 feet, with 18 to 24 inches of space between; lay some boards between the rows. This setup should allow weeding and harvesting from row-side and discourage foot traffic in the bed. Figure that once a plant reaches its prime, it will yield about a half-pound to a pound of green spears over the course of one season. You'll want to put in about a dozen plants for each asparagus enthusiast. Allow for 1½ feet between each plant in the row.

Plant the crowns in the prepared beds as soon after purchasing as possible. Settle each one on the bottom of the trench. Cover with two inches of soil from the bank, and firm the earth gently over the plants.