

Asparagus

Asparagus officinalis



A perennial home garden vegetable; delicious spears reappear every spring, but take 2-3 years to come into full production. The feathery foliage is also quite beautiful. Commonly asparagus is grown from crowns (roots). Seed grown asparagus will take 2-3 years to bear.

SITE REQUIREMENTS

Asparagus yields best in full sun (at least six hours of direct sun), but tolerates light shade. An area sheltered from strong winds is preferred. Provide well-drained soil with a neutral pH.

PLANTING

Our asparagus growers recommend building a bed rich in organic matter in the fall and planting into it in the spring. Plant asparagus roots in spring as soon as the soil is dry enough to dig a 8" deep furrow without large clods. Soak the roots for 30 minutes prior to planting. Create a trench 12" wide and 8" deep. Mix in 1-2" of compost in the trench along with lime and bonemeal. Also mix a layer of compost with the fill soil. Place crowns (roots) on top of individual mounds of soil created inside the trench, making sure that each crown does not touch one another. This is because the roots tend to mold with contact to each other. Plant crowns roughly 12" apart, depending on the size. Now cover with 1-2" of soil. As the season progresses gradually fill in the trench so there is 6-8" of soil over the crowns. This gradual covering helps prevent rot in the cool damp soils of spring.

WATER REQUIREMENTS

During initial growth period, irrigate well, allowing soil to dry out a bit in between waterings. Irrigate regularly for the first two years. Once bed is well established, asparagus is very drought tolerant.

MAINTENANCE

Weeding is essential for a healthy asparagus patch. Once bed is well established by the third year, asparagus does not need fertilizing. After about 3 years you'll want to add ½ " compost on top of the crowns to keep them below the soil surface where they're most happy. Apply lime every few years to continually sweeten the soil. Cut back yellow foliage every fall. Fall clean up in the asparagus bed is vital for preventing disease. Cut all yellow stalks to the ground and rake away all the fallen foliage.

HARVESTING & STORAGE

Allow plants to grow undisturbed their first year. Harvest lightly next spring cutting spears only for 4-6 weeks or until shoots become thin. Be careful to not cut below the soil level. By the third year you will have a full harvest season of 8-12 weeks.

In cooler northern climates you can extend the season using the motherstalk method. Harvest spears for 2 weeks and then allow two or three spears from different crowns to grow and produce foliage. This initially slows production for a few weeks, but it will pick up once the energy produced by the foliage kicks in. You can keep harvesting for 10 weeks.

PESTS & DISEASES

*Snails and slugs chew on young spears and foliage of mature plants. Slug baits and beer traps are just a couple methods to control them.

*Cutworms and Armyworms feed on spears near the soil line. Beneficial nematodes applied in fall or early spring can help control the larva population. Spinosad helps control the worm population.

*Asparagus Beetles chew small holes in the spears and the tips of the damaged spears often curl. Cover beds with floating row covers, and securely seal the edges in early spring to keep out beetles. Organic sprays such as insecticidal soap, pyrethrins and spinosad all help control populations.

*Gray Mold shows as brown or gray fuzzy growth on spears. It is especially prevalent in cool wet weather. Remove and destroy infected spears and then remove mulch. This will help soil dry out. Neem oil can help protect healthy plant tissue in warm weather.

*Fusarium Wilt appears as weak, brown spears. Fusarium wilt is a permanent soil borne fungus. The best course of action is to remove and destroy the infected patch. Start a new bed with fresh crowns in a different location.

*Rust (Needle Blight) appears as the feathery foliage loses “needles” very early. Upon closer inspection the foliage will exhibit orange spots. In cold wet weather it may appear as gray spots with a purple edge. Cut down infected fronds and destroy them. Spray healthy foliage with neem oil or other fungicide approved for edible crops.

VARIETIES

It is debatable whether it matters if your plants are male or female. Some say that male plants may be more “sturdy” for they are not using any energy to create the fruit and seeds to reproduce, although it is harder to say if this affects the size and quality of the spears. We offer an exclusively male variety called Jersey Knight, and a variety called Sweet Purple, which is both male and female. You can differentiate the genders by root size. The larger roots are male.

*Jersey Knight- This all-male asparagus variety yields the highest quality spears of the Jersey hybrids. It has performed exceptionally well in trials all across the U.S. Each mature plant produces 7-9 choice 7-10” spears tipped with a purplish blush. At that length, spear diameter is between 3/8-3/4”. Highly resistant to rust, fusarium, root rot, crown rot and cercospora. Easily overwinters in the maritime Northwest.

*Mary Washington- Long straight shoots, very thick and heavy; color rich dark green, slightly tinged purple at the tightly folded tips. Uniform, heavy yields, 60 day cutting season. Holds a tight bud longer than most. Somewhat rust resistant. Female variety.

*Sweet Purple This new type of asparagus has many similar characteristics to the green varieties but offers something new for the connoisseur. Crowns are both male and female. Deep burgundy spears with a 20% higher sugar content. Because of this extra sweetness, this vegetable is often eaten raw or as a salad garnish. When cooked, the sweetness gives the asparagus a mild, nutty flavor. Spears are generally larger, more tender, and less stringy than their green counterpart. This allows the cook to use the entire spear with little waste.