

# ASPARAGUS



Asparagus is one of those harbingers of spring, and growing your own makes all the difference in taste. These perennial plants can be a prolific and relatively carefree crop that's productive for 20+ years. It's important to show some restraint for the first few years and hold back on harvesting until the root system becomes fully established. In the third year, you can harvest a percentage while leaving the rest to grow. Once the plant has become fern-like, it's a beautiful landscape feature.

## ENJOYING THE BOUNTY

Asparagus spears often don't make it to the pot because they taste so amazing fresh picked and raw. But tossed with olive oil and lightly salted, they're also delicious broiled or roasted. Many people enjoy asparagus simply steamed or cooked into soup. You can add garlic and lemon to help bring out the flavor.

This vegetable is rich in vitamins and minerals including A, C, E, K, and B6, folate, iron, potassium, copper, calcium, and protein. It's high in fiber and low in calories. It's also high in antioxidants.

Asparagus has a sulfur compound that gives off a pungent smell you may notice when you pee. Another harbinger of spring!



## CHOOSING A SITE

Asparagus needs full sun. The soil should be well-drained and loamy, with a pH of 6.5 to 7.5. Test your soil to know what you're working with and then adjust its pH before you plant. Remember, these plants will be here for 20+ years, so get them off to a good start. Add plenty of good compost to the soil in preparation of planting.

## PLANTING

It's best to purchase asparagus crowns that are one-year-old roots with buds. You can expect about a pound of asparagus from each plant after it's fully established.

Wait until the soil is at least 50 degrees to initially plant your crowns. Because asparagus ferns will reach 4 to 5 feet tall, be sure to plant them in the back of the garden or on its the north side so they don't shade other crops. Still, asparagus needs full sun (8 to 10 hours/day).

Plant your crowns in furrows that are 7 inches deep, bud-side up and with the roots spread out. You should have about 10 to 12 inches between crowns and 3 to 6 feet between rows. Don't refill the trench completely at this point. Put just a few inches over the crowns to begin with and add soil as the spears emerge through the soil, until they are level with the existing ground.

## TAKING CARE: WATERING, FEEDING, PRUNING

Watering is crucial in the first year, so water weekly as necessary. Make sure your watering is consistent throughout the growing season. Set up a timer on your irrigation. Using a soaker hose or drip irrigation is preferable. Overhead (sprinkler) watering will get the foliage wet and invite disease.

In the second and subsequent years, place a 2-inch-thick layer of compost around the plants. You can use a balanced organic fertilizer every few years in addition. Spray a few times over the season with fish emulsion foliar feed to keep the plants healthy and happy. Mulch over the compost with

straw or fine wood chips, to help retain moisture between waterings and create a barrier between the foliage and soilborne pathogens.

## AVOIDING PESTS AND DISEASE

Keeping water off the foliage goes a long way in keeping disease at bay, so don't water overhead. Keep the asparagus bed well weeded so harmful insects don't have a place to take hold. In late winter, cut back your dried stems; this will expose any asparagus beetles to the cold and send them packing. These are the common pests to be on the lookout for with asparagus:

**ASPARAGUS BEETLES** lay their eggs on and feed on spears, causing them to become deformed and damaged. Cut back old plant material and burn it to help expose and dispose of lingering insects.

**JAPANESE BEETLES** can be a real problem, diminishing the vigorousness of your plants, if the populations are healthy. You can control these beetles in the grub stage by spraying with *Bacillus thuringiensis galleriae* (Btg), milky spore and parasitic nematodes. Also, if the numbers are reasonable, handpicking goes a long way.

## HARVESTING

In year 2, you can take one to two spears per plant if you have at least four others that you are leaving to continue growing for the rest of the season. By year 3, you can increase your harvest but leave three stems per plant to make the food for the plant.

Harvest when the spears are pencil thin and snap them off with your hand near the base. If the asparagus doesn't readily snap off, work your way up the spear until you get that sharp snap. The lower stem may be tough and woody if it doesn't readily snap.

## CONSIDERING SPECIFIC VARIETIES

If you want the highest yield, choose male plants. This will increase the number of spears your asparagus patch can produce. The beautiful red berries on female plants pull energy away from the productivity of the spears. Some varieties available now are exclusively male. In the world of asparagus, you'll find some old standbys and some good newcomers:

**MILLINEUM** is an all-male variety developed at the University of Guelph in Ontario. It is very productive, cold tolerant, and tasty.

**JERSEY KNIGHT** has large green spears and uniform size. It grows well in most climates and is highly resistant to rust. It's more tolerant to fusarium than other varieties.

**JERSEY SUPREME**, a high-yielding standby with slim green spears, is also resistant to rust.

**SPARTACUS** is an all-male hybrid variety that is green with purple-tinged tips and can be more productive than Jersey varieties. The spears are long — more than 9 inches.

**PACIFIC PURPLE** is a British asparagus that is flavorful and high yielding. It has extra thick, deep-purple spears.

**PURPLE PASSION** has large-diameter purple spears that are sweeter and more tender than green varieties. They will not stay purple when cooked.

**MARY WASHINGTON IMPROVED**, an open-pollinated green variety, produces more spears and tighter tips than its predecessor and has great flavor.