

Asparagus

Asparagus is a perennial vegetable that thrives with little care and can produce an early spring harvest of fresh succulent spears. Asparagus prefers well-drained, sandy loam soil and comes back each year from underground storage roots and rhizomes. The area should be free of perennial weeds such as bermudagrass or johnsongrass. Choose the location of your asparagus bed wisely as it will be in that spot forever.

Most backyard gardeners plant asparagus crowns. The nursery industry grades the crowns as “1-year”, “2-year”, and “3-year” from smallest to largest. In reality, all are one year-old crowns grown from seed. Larger crowns have greater vigor and are preferred. Purchase crowns or seed from a reputable nursery or seed catalog. Asparagus requires a garden area with full sun where it will grow for many years. The plants get big and rangy (5 to 6 feet tall), so plant them on the north or east side of your garden to avoid shading other low-growing crops. Plant after the soil has reached 50 degrees F.

Asparagus yields 8 to 10 pounds or more per 100 square feet of bed when tended well. For most home gardeners, a 20-foot row or 100 square feet of bed is adequate for a family of four. That's equivalent to 20 planted crowns or 10 pounds of harvested asparagus per season.

When planting seed or crowns, dig a 10 to 12 inch hole and then till and amend the soil in the bottom of the hole. An application of phosphorus fertilizer incorporated into the soil before planting will ensure vigorous root growth. Seeds can be sown and covered with a little soil. If crowns are planted, they should be spaced 1 foot apart in rows. Each row should be 4 to 5 feet apart. Crowns should have buds facing up and root systems spread out as much as possible. Cover the crowns with loose soil up to the original soil level at the bottom of the hole.

Once plants are one foot tall, backfill them with 6 inches of soil. Continue adding the soil over time to establish deep crowns. Do not harvest during the first year. Instead, allow the plants to grow wildly, fertilize with nitrogen, and keep them well irrigated. This will allow them to photosynthesize at maximum potential and store that energy in the crowns for the following year's crop. Maintain a 4 to 6 inch deep layer of straw/hay/leaf mulch to suppress weeds and keep the soil friable.

The following spring before asparagus emerges, remove the brushy, dead tops, weed the area, and fertilize with 1.2 pounds of 5-10-10 fertilizer per 100 square feet of bed. If you are tempted, only harvest a few spears the second year allowing the rest to grow. Side-dress that same amount of fertilizer again in July. The idea is to build up energy in the crowns each year.

The third spring, you may start harvesting spears after they reach 7 to 10 inches in length. Harvest spears below ground with a sharp knife. The spear should be green and tender. A simple rule is to never harvest a spear smaller than a pencil. Allow the remaining plants to grow and store energy for the following year.



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Asparagus plants are dioecious, meaning they produce male and female flowers on separate plants. The seedlings produced by these plants can sometimes become a weed problem. Some varieties are all-male hybrids that do not produce seed. The most common varieties are UC157, Mary Washington, and Martha Washington, Jersey Giant, Jersey Knight, and Jersey King. UC157 is probably the best variety for our climate.

What about the age-old question of why eating asparagus can result in odd smelling urine. Biochemists have isolated sulfur-containing compounds including, but not limited to methanethiol. These odd smelling compounds are likely to be caused by the breakdown of asparagusic acid: a compound unique to asparagus. Interestingly, only 22% of the population seems to be able to detect this unusual odor.

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Adapted from original Backyard Gardener publications by Jeff Schalau, Agent, Agriculture & Natural Resources, University of Arizona Cooperative Extension, Yavapai County

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