

ASPARAGUS IN THE HOME GARDEN

Like peas, asparagus is another early starter in the home garden that thrives in early spring weather. Once planted it will continue to yield without replanting for a long time and it gives fresh vegetables early in the summer. Asparagus prefers a pH of 6.5-7.5. It also requires full sun. Fertilizer should be provided before growth starts in the spring and again when the harvest is finished in early summer.

Asparagus can be planted from seed or from crowns. One-year and two-year old crowns are available in most garden stores in the early spring. Starting with crowns rather than growing plants from seed saves at least a year in the development of productive plants. An advantage to starting with seeds is that you have a greater choice of variety and the initial cost is much less.

If starting from seed, it is best to set up a nursery bed where the plants can be grown for one year. All the female plants should be pulled out, as they will never yield as well as the males. Female ferns will have berries. Too much of their energy goes into setting berries and seed. Mary Washington has long been the standard asparagus, but better varieties are now available if you are growing from seed. University of California (UC) 500 W or Jersey are some of these varieties. Weed control must be very good the first year and the young plants need excellent drainage. Seeds can be planted in a 6" x 6" grid pattern. The one-year-old plants can be moved to their permanent location in April. It will require three years from the first sowing to the first cutting of spears.

One-year-old crowns will establish the root system quickly after planting, as do the two or three year old crowns. The time to harvest is the same for all ages of crowns. Asparagus will tolerate a wide range of soil texture as long as drainage and aeration are good. It is an excellent candidate for growing on raised beds. Asparagus is very susceptible to root rot in poorly drained soils or following long periods of heavy rains. For each crown dig a hole about 8-10" deep or dig a trench the length of the bed at that depth. Fill the hole halfway with compost or manure, mixed with lime, bonemeal and rock phosphate, cover with an inch of soil and set the crowns 24" apart in staggered rows. A 3' wide bed can easily accommodate a double row. Cover the spread-out crowns with about 2" of soil and as the shoots emerge, gradually add more soil until the trench or hole is filled. Weeds can be controlled manually or with mulch.

In the first year the plants should be kept growing vigorously so they can strengthen and develop their root systems. The ferns should not be cut back until they have yellowed. In the second year from crowns, a few spears can be cut for eating, but over-cutting will weaken the plants. Add soil as needed to maintain the level. Each year the ferns must be left on until yellow in order to nourish the plant for the next year. In the third year from crowns (fourth from seed) normal harvesting can be commenced. If the spears are snapped off, the tough parts will all be left in the ground. If you prefer to cut the spears, be careful not to damage the crown and root system. The roots tend to spread laterally rather than downward. To extend the harvest, bury some of the crowns more deeply than others and these will emerge a little later. Spears are best harvested when 6-8" tall. If there have been insect and/or disease problems, all the old ferns should be removed and composted. If not, the chopped ferns can be returned

as mulch. Cutting should be stopped no later than June 20 to allow for fern growth or when the diameter of the-spears begins to diminish noticeably, i.e., when pencil-size shoots appear.

If an older bed becomes too crowded, the crowns can be lifted and transplanted. On a 24" x 24" spacing this will usually occur in 4-5 years.

FERTILIZING

Asparagus responds well to fertilization with rotted manure or compost in late winter just before growth starts and after harvest in early summer. Also, 1/4 lb. ammonium sulfate or 1/4 lb. urea per 100-sq. ft. of growing area can be used. Asparagus requires a steady supply of water during the growing season.

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