

Asparagus Information Sheet

Asparagus does not like excessive heat. It prefers cool temperatures and cold winters. Establishing an asparagus bed takes time and care. Growing from seed will require 4 years until the first heavy crop. You can buy 1, 2, or 3 year old crowns which will produce in 3, 2, or 1 years respectively. Plants grown from seed require more patience but usually out-produce those from nursery crowns. Once your bed is established it will produce for 20 years if cared for properly.

Where to plant

Carefully choose the site as it will be there a long time. Along the side of the garden is a good spot; someplace it won't be plowed up or run over by mistake. Asparagus is a heavy feeder and requires rich, well drained soil that is cultivated deeply. Sunshine is also important. The traditional fertilizer for the asparagus bed is manure but good compost will work as well.

Growing from seed

Germination time: 10-21 days

Germination temperature: 60-85 F.

In cold climates start seed in flats indoors late February or early March. Soak the seeds overnight in warm (not hot) water and plant ½ inch deep. They take a long time to germinate so mark the spot with stakes or radish seeds. When the plants are a couple of inches tall, thin to 1 inch apart and keep them weeded but avoid damaging the roots. In about 12-14 weeks, when danger of frost is past, transplant into a nursery (temporary) bed. Transplant into the permanent bed the next spring.

In mild climates plant seed right into a nursery bed outdoors and transplant into the permanent bed in late August.

In the nursery bed small flowers will appear. Examine them with a magnifying glass. Female flowers have well-developed pistils with 3 lobes. Male flowers are larger and longer. If you want only spears for eating and don't intend to harvest your own seed you might want to eliminate the female plants. All male beds will produce 25-30% more spears.

Transplanting

Asparagus produces a large root system and you want them deep enough to avoid damage from cultivation. Dig a trench 18 inches deep and 12 inches wide. Cover the bottom with 6 inches of well rotted manure and 6 inches of topsoil over that. Place the crowns (roots) or seedlings 12-18 inches apart on a small mound of soil with the roots spread out. Cover with 2 inches of soil. As they grow add more soil until the bed is slightly mounded and remove weeds.

Care

Every fall and spring cover the bed with a layer of aged manure or compost. Wood ashes are also beneficial. Much can be used except on young plants which may not be able to grow through it.

Harvest

You may take a small harvest the third year (for 4-6 weeks) and the fourth year and thereafter you may begin full harvest of 5-10 weeks. Snap off the spears when they are 4-6 inches tall and the size of your thumb but before the "scales" on the tip begin to open. Harvest every day or two in the morning for tender spears. Harvest them all for best production. Stop harvest in mid summer to let the roots build reserves for the next season.

Disease

A treatment of 2 ½ lbs of rock salt per 100 feet of row (use sodium chloride NOT calcium chloride, pickling salt will work, just make sure it is not iodized) has been shown to prevent crown and root rot and improve growth.

Asparagus beetle can be controlled by removing trash, leaves, etc, where they overwinter. Chickens, ducks, or guinea hens will also do a good job getting rid of the beetles and their larvae.