



# Growing Asparagus

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## Asparagus Beds Last Many Years

Growing asparagus is a long term project and one for which patience is needed. Asparagus is a perennial and differs from most vegetables in that it produces a harvestable crop very early in the spring. The bare young spears poke through the soil in early to mid May. Asparagus will grow in most types of soil but must have soil that drains well. It must have dry feet. Clear the area of all vegetation, especially perennial weeds since asparagus will keep on producing for 30 years or more if weeds are kept under control. Cultivate the soil deeply and work in a generous amount of composted manure.

## Varieties to Plant

'Martha Washington' or 'Guelph Millennium' are good choices.

## When to Plant

Set out asparagus roots in early spring. Strong two year old crowns with at least ten roots each are best.

## Sowing Seeds

Guelph Millennium seed is available from Stokes. One packet should produce 15 roots. Starting asparagus from seed results in no harvest for 4 years. Soak seed for 48 hours before planting. Indoors sow seeds 8 weeks before last frost (March 30) in a seed starting mix at a temperature of 20 ° C,  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch deep for germination. Harden off seedlings and transplant them in early summer. Outdoors when soil becomes warmer and drier, seeds can be directly sown into the ground 3 weeks before the last frost date  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch deep. A few radish seeds sown will mark the row to make cultivation easier.

## How Much to Plant

Each plant will yield 6 -12 more spears during the harvest period. A 50 foot row containing 35 plants should yield about 20 – 25 pounds by the fourth year grown from two year old roots.

## How to Plant Roots

Asparagus needs a good supply of phosphorous so add one handful of bone meal per plant worked into the soil before planting. Dig a trench 6 – 8 inches deep and plant in a single row or double rows 18 inches apart. Space the crowns 12 – 18 inches apart in the trench, spread out the roots over mound of soil and cover with 2 inches of well firmed soil. Feed the new plants with a starter fertilizer such as 10 – 50 – 10 once a week for the first three weeks after planting. As the shoots grow up, fill in the trench with a little more soil. A mulch of well rotted manure or compost will retain moisture and suppress weeds.

## **Growing**

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First year do not harvest any asparagus spears. The plants need to grow as much top or ferns as they can to put energy into the roots for the next year's growth. Let the tops die down in the late fall but leave them there for winter protection. The second year, cut off the old dead leaves and clear them out in early spring. Fertilize with compost or 5 –10 –10. Do not harvest any spears the second year. You can mulch to prevent weed growth and to conserve moisture. The third years, cut off the old dead leaves and clear them out in early spring and fertilize. This year you can harvest spears for a 2 – 3 week period.

## **Harvesting**

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The fourth year, you can harvest for 3 – 4 weeks and following years increase harvesting period up to 6 weeks with the last harvest about July 1st. Some spears must be allowed each year to produce mature leaves to replenish the root reserves for next year's crop. Allow ferns to die back on their own each fall and leave to overwinter to trap snow around the plants providing moisture and insulating roots from the cold. Dead ferns are removed each spring. Fertilize asparagus twice a year, once in early spring and again after the last harvest. Harvest spears every other day or even daily to get the best yield. When spears are 6 – 8 inches high with tight leaf scales, cut stalks with a sharp knife just below ground level. Take care not to damage young spears which have not poked through the ground. White asparagus spears are produced by excluding light by covering the growing shoots with mounded soil or black plastic.

## **Storage**

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Fresh asparagus is very perishable and loses quality quickly. Store asparagus unwashed in the refrigerator for 3 – 4 days. Clean the spears just before you are ready to cook. Remove tough bottom ends by snapping the stalk in your fingers. It will break between the tender and tough sections.

## **Problems**

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Asparagus beetle adults are black and red or yellow and larvae are dark gray in colour. Both of them strip the foliage from the plants and eat the spears as well as the adults lay black eggs up the spears. Control the beetles by hand picking early in the season. Late spring frost damage can be prevented by covering the plants with an old bed sheet or purchased row cover.