



## Newton Le Willows Gardeners' Association

### Asparagus

#### Planting

Asparagus crowns one year old are planted in early spring, as soon as the soil can be worked. Plant in soil that is rich, well-draining and fertile. A few months before, dig thoroughly and remove all large stones and any perennial weeds as these will compete for the nutrients in the soil,. Next add a good dose of well-rotted manure and/or organic matter. If the soil is acidic, add lime to bring the pH level to 6.5-7.0. Next, dig a trench 30cm wide by 30cm deep. Now create a mound 10cm high in the bottom of the trench. Plant the crowns on the top of the mound spreading the roots apart and trailing down the sides of the mound at 25cm intervals with 45cm between rows. Cover with 5cm of sifted soil and water in. As the shoots emerge, add more soil until the trench is filled in.

#### Aftercare

Keep the asparagus bed well weeded, preferably by hand to prevent damage to the tender roots. During the summer and into winter, asparagus throws up tall, fern-like foliage. These will need to be staked to avoid them being blown over. Once they have turned yellow in autumn, cut them down to 2.5-5cm above ground level. Add a mulch of well-rotted manure and apply either rose or tomato fertiliser in November and March.

#### Harvesting

Do not harvest any spears until year three to enable the plant to establish itself. They are taken in April to early June. Avoid harvesting after that, leaving the ferns to grow until they are cut down in autumn. This will allow the plant to further establish itself. Cut them when they are 13-18cm tall using a sharp knife at soil level. It is best to do so before the tips open to ensure the best flavour.

#### Male or female?

Male plants live longer and produce bigger and better yields. Female plants produce orange-red berries that drop to become seedlings, which can be a nuisance. Mail order companies are more likely to sell male plants.

#### Damage

Young, emerging spears can be affected by slugs and snails so use your favoured method to control them whether this is hand removal nightly, beer traps, slug pellets or nematodes.

Adult asparagus beetle are black with yellow patches and a red thorax. Both adults and larvae will feed on the stems and foliage. Be vigilant and pick off these pests by hand. Pyrethrum based pesticides can be used with care as they are indiscriminating killers of insects including bees.

Phytophthora and fusarium can be guarded against by choosing an open, sunny site, and preparing the soil thoroughly and deeply. Do not grow in waterlogged or very wet soils or in the shade of trees or buildings.

Late frosts can damage the growing tips. Cover plants with horticultural fleece if frost is forecast.

#### Varieties

Amaro Montana (DT Brown, Ken Muir, Organic Gardening Catalogue): Italian 'wild' variety, strong flavoured, slender dark green spears.

Arienne (DT Brown, Mr Fothergills, Marshalls, T&M): Mid-season. Heavy cropping, large purple spears.

Backlim (Marshalls): Mid to late season variety, large spears with good disease resistance.

Connover's Colossal (Victoriana Nursery): Popular heritage variety with green stems and purple tips.

Gijnlim (Pomona, Marshalls): Early season, high yielding, green stems, medium thickness spears tipped with purple.

Guelph Millennium (Suttons, T&M): Cold-tolerant, and later maturing, suitable for northern gardens.

Lucullus: Not commercially available. An all-male plant with a later cropping yield of medium size spears.

Mondeo (Mr Fothergills, Suttons, Pomona, T&M): German bred, stronger flavour.

Pacific Purple (Dobies, Mr. Fothergills, Ken Muir, Marshalls): Sweet and tender, purple spears, good raw in salads.

Pacific Challenger (T&M): Early, has Phytophthora disease resistance.

Stewart's Purple (Suttons, Pomona): Sweet, high yielding, good cooked or raw.

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