



How to Grow Asparagus

Asparagus is one of the few perennial vegetable crops. The delicately flavoured shoots are picked as young spears in the spring. . Shoots continue emerging from the soil throughout the spring as the weather warms; shoots end to become spindly and are left to grow into the mature ferny foliage which changes to a golden colour in the autumn. Because asparagus takes up a permanent place in the garden, but can be an attractive plant, many people with space imitations use asparagus as a border or hedge plant.

Although plants require space, once established they should crop for up to 20 years, each crown yielding 9-12 spears per cutting season. Although green varieties are most commonly grown, there are also many purple varieties

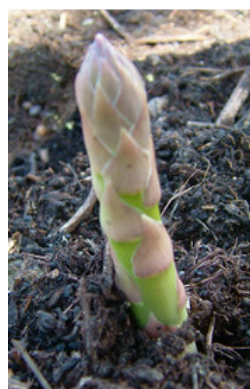
Choosing a site

Asparagus will grow on most soil types provided it is drained with pH of 6.5-7.5 so more acidic soils may need liming. Choose a sunny position in a sheltered area; a late frost can damage the crop severely so avoid planting in frost pockets. Because asparagus is grown in a permanent bed it is important that the bed is well prepared so start the planting area well in advance, autumn is a good time. Clear the ground of perennial weeds. The roots can go down 1.2 metres so a good depth of soil helps, previously it was recommended to grow them on a mounded bed but nowadays a raised deep bed is considered the best method. It needs well drained soil that has been well cultivated initially; contain plenty of humus and possibly some grit or sharp sand to open it up.

Avoid planting asparagus near root vegetables which will disturb there delicate roots.

Cultivation

Asparagus can be raised from seed but it is more usual to buy 1 year old crowns planting in March or April. Asparagus plants are either male or female were the male plants are more productive and all male F1 hybrids are available were the energy goes into edible spears rather than berries. Any female plants which have orange-red berries should be removed.



Plant crowns 30- 45cm apart in a 30 cm wide trench about 20cm deep, create a ridge approximately 10cm high, in the centre and plant the crowns straddling the peak so the roots slope downwards and out. Cover with fine riddled soil leaving the bud tips just visible. Water them thoroughly and then cover them with a 5cm mulch of well-rotted manure. If growing them in rows, leave roughly 45cm between them. In several weeks, the first young spears will appear.

Keep asparagus moist but not wet when the spears are forming. Plants will survive without extra watering, but the stalks may become stringy and woody. To avoid top-growth breaking off in wind and damaging the spears support the rows with canes and twine. Asparagus beds must be kept weed free, best done by hand weeding as the shallow roots are easily damaged by hoeing. With this in mind it may be best to mulch the area as suppressing light discourages weeds and retains moisture.

In the spring draw up a ridge over the plant centre about 10cm high. Apply 100g per sq m of a balanced fertiliser like fish, blood and bone or Growmore and repeat once harvesting has finished. Top up the mulch of manure in late autumn or early spring. In autumn, allow the foliage to yellow before cutting it down to 2.5cm.

Do not harvest for the first two years. In the third year start to harvest, cutting diagonally individual spears with a sharp knife 2.5cm below the soil when they are no more than 18cm tall. In warm weather, harvest every two to three days for best quality spears. The real season starts in mid-May and runs through June when you must stop cutting. Expect about 20 to 25 spears per plant for the next 20 years.



Problems Growing Asparagus

Asparagus is generally disease free with the main pests being slugs and snails, and the larvae and adults of the asparagus beetle. Asparagus Beetle is about 8mm long, and is black with yellow spots on them. They can be picked off individually in most cases. Maintain good hygiene around the spear by removing debris where the pests are likely to hide.

Thin spindly shoots could be due to inadequate moisture levels, especially on young crowns. Water them well and add an organic liquid feed, such as seaweed to give them a boost. In established beds weak spears is more likely from over harvesting or competition from weeds. Late frosts may also cause distorted growth and if required protect with fleece.

