

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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There are three perennials that once established will grow and provide a bountiful crop year after year. They are easy to grow and never need to be replanted. Rhubarb, asparagus and horseradish are usually disease and insect free and don't require much attention. They need a nice sunny location and good soil rich in compost. They should be placed in a spot that can be left undisturbed. These are all suitable next to a wall, as a border, or in the back of the garden where they can serve as a background for your vegetables or even your flowers.

Rhubarb can be planted as soon as the soil can be worked in early spring. Plant the rhubarb crowns about 3 feet apart with the buds about 2 inches deep. Don't harvest any rhubarb the first season. This gives the plants time to establish a good strong root system. By the third year you can reap a full crop.

Rhubarb has many uses: pies, juice, sauce, jams and jellies. Remember that the leaves are poisonous to eat; however they can be composted or even used as mulch. Rhubarb is fairly easy to pick. Grab a stalk down near the base and pull it to the side sharply just like you pull celery stalks from a bunch of celery. A lot of folks think of rhubarb as the first taste of spring.

Asparagus also should be planted in early spring. Plant asparagus in rows three feet apart in a trench about 12 inches deep and 12-18 inches wide. Fill the trench half full, mounded slightly. Place the crowns on top of the mound and drape the roots down and away from the crown. They should be spaced 12-14 inches apart, then covered with 2 inches of soil. As the plant grows fill in the trench until the soil is ground level. Your asparagus bed can last 30 years or more and can produce about ½ pound of delicious spears per foot of row from spring through early summer. Asparagus is very versatile, it can be eaten fresh as steamed, fried or stir fried. It can be frozen, canned or pickled. It is a great addition to any garden.

Horseradish should also be planted in early spring. Plant your pieces of horseradish root 4-5 inches deep 2 feet apart and at a 45 degree angle with the flat top end pointing upward. Beware! Horseradish is very easy to grow and can easily become a problem if you want to get rid of it. It has a very long taproot that will grow straight down but it also has secondary roots that can grow horizontally 3 feet or more. Even the tiniest bit of root can sprout new plants that can overcome the garden. A good idea is to cut out the bottom of a large barrel and sink the barrel into the soil then plant your horseradish in the barrel.

Fresh horseradish has a pungent, spicy aroma, and it is HOT. The easiest way to prepare horseradish is in your blender. Peel and cube the thick, white roots enough to fill the blender ½ full, then add a small amount of water. Blend well until you get the right consistency, then add ¼ teaspoon of salt and 2-3 teaspoons of white vinegar to each cup of horseradish. If you want milder horseradish add the vinegar right away. The longer you wait to add the vinegar the hotter it will be. Because of the strong fumes it is best to either do this outside or in a well-ventilated room. Horseradish adds spice to dips, fish, sauces, and meat. It is great served with steak, roasts or London broils.

All three of these plants are a great addition to your garden and to your table. So plant and enjoy for years to come. Happy Gardening.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Cooperative Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.