

Asparagus in Western Washington

I would like to encourage those who can spare the room in their garden, to consider growing asparagus. Asparagus fresh from the garden is significantly different from that purchased at the store. Used within the first 24 to 36 hours after cutting, raw asparagus has a taste reminiscent of raw sweet peas. Mmm good! Most grocery asparagus is going to be as much as one week old when purchased.

As a kid in Eastern Washington, I lived on a farm where we had around 80 acres of asparagus under production. When my employment brought me to Clark County, I decided that I must have asparagus like that at home. After several plantings over the years, I have found that asparagus prefers a mildly alkaline soil (about 7.5 pH). A perennial, it can produce from an established bed for 15 to 20 years before declining in production. Because of this, you only get one chance to improve the soil and get both organic matter and pH adjusted within the top 12 inches of your soil.

It takes three years for asparagus to come into production from seed; two years if transplanted roots are used. I would recommend roots because of the shorter amount of time and less work involved. If grown from seed, the roots will need to be dug, stored and replanted the following spring at a depth of 4 to 6 inches; they should not be left in place at the shallow seed-planting depth. Although you may find references which suggest a 6- to 8- inch planting depth, I believe that a shallower depth (4 to 6 inches) is better in our area, because of the drainage issues.

Asparagus prefers sandy to loamy soil, but can be grown in the heavier clays in Clark County if they are properly amended. Again, asparagus **MUST** have good drainage, or you will experience some die-out over winter.

In the first year, the roots should be planted 10 to 12 inches apart in a two-inch deep furrow. Soil should gradually be added, through hilling, as the plants establish themselves and send up stronger shoots during the growing season. Your eventual bed row should end up as a raised mound 3 to 4 inches above soil grade.

During the second growing season, the asparagus may be cut for a period of two weeks to encourage side shoot development, but should then be left to grow into ferns for strength for the next year's crop.

In the third year, the asparagus can be considered to be in full production and should be cut from the first shoots of spring (around April 10) until mid-June, when you should again let the shoots grow into ferns. Declining shoot diameter is one indication that the plants are stressed; cutting should be stopped and ferns permitted to grow.

A 20- to 30-foot row of asparagus should produce enough to meet an average family's needs. Many new varieties have been introduced, among them the newer all-male plants, such as Jersey Knight, which are advertised to be more productive because of the absence of seed production. These varieties have done well in my garden. One of the old standards available through seed catalogs, Mary Washington, has very beautiful purple-tinged coloring,

but isn't as productive as the newer varieties. WSU Prosser Irrigated Agricultural Research and Extension Center rated UC157 as the highest-yielding cultivar among the varieties in 1992.

The only pests I have experienced in my garden are asparagus beetles, and pear psylla. These pests will attack the ferns and strip the foliage. If caught in time, they can be controlled by hand picking. Malathion dust can be used for control, but I try to avoid this if at all possible, and use it only during the fern stage, if at all. Good bed cultivation, removal by hand, and some baiting (if necessary), will take care of the slugs attracted by the emerging spears. Again, if you just give asparagus a try, I think you will find the results mouth-watering delicious!

Sources

Rickett, Harold William. *Botany for Gardeners*. NY: Macmillan, 1957, Pg 150.

[Washington Asparagus Production Guide](#), WSU Extension Bulletin 0997.

UC157 and Jersey Knight are available as seeds or crowns from [Territorial Seed Company](#).

Mary Washington seeds and Jersey Knight roots are available from Irish [Eyes and Garden City Seeds](#).