

Starting an Asparagus Bed

Asparagus officinalis



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If you love fresh asparagus, think about starting your own bed. Planting a new asparagus bed is labor intensive initially, but once established, it can thrive on benign neglect. Plus, it is fun to look at. The spears that are too small to harvest will grow into 5-6 foot feathery billowy fern-like fronds. Asparagus is one of the few perennial vegetables. Tucked away in a spot where it can flourish undisturbed, it will provide years of return with very little investment.

Cultivation can be traced back 2000 years in the eastern Mediterranean area. The name derives from the Greek word "asparagos" which in turn originates from the Persian "asparag" meaning sprout or shoot. Asparagus is low in calories, contains no cholesterol and is very low in sodium. The second century physician, Galen, described asparagus as "cleansing and healing." It contains substances that act as a diuretic, neutralize ammonia that makes us tired, and protect small blood vessels from rupturing.

Until recently asparagus cultivation required patience. However, once established, a bed can continue to produce for 15 to 20 years or more, but starting the bed meant purchasing one to two year old crowns and waiting 2 to 4 years to harvest.

New hybrids and all-male asparagus varieties (Jersey Knight is one such all male cultivar) are producing higher yielding and more disease tolerant plants with greater longevity than female plants or mixed plantings.

Steve Solomon, in his book *Growing Vegetables West of the Cascades*, proposes starting from seed rather than the conventional method of planting one to two year old crowns. Using seed rather than crowns allows you to affordably destroy the female plant (more later), the extra productive and all male varieties are only available by seed, seeds are cheaper, and heavy production can begin a year earlier. If your growing conditions are iffy, seeds will allow you to test your conditions without a huge investment.

Asparagus is essentially a root crop that stores its food supply in its fleshy roots and sends up "jet powered" shoots that can grow 4 inches per day. The mature shoots look like ferns and it is their job to manufacture sugars to be stored in the roots for next year's crop. Unlike other root crops, asparagus requires rich, well draining soil. Asparagus doesn't like to be waterlogged (a problem during our wet winters), so planting in a raised bed will help

alleviate drainage problems. Dig the soil well and work in general purpose garden fertilizer (10-10-10) as well as compost. Make an extra fertile strip long way down the center of the bed by spreading a layer of compost or manure about 1½ inches thick and spread about one gallon of general purpose fertilizer per every 25 feet of the fertile strip. Dig these amendments as deep as your shovel will go. Soak seeds overnight (no longer than 12 hours). Make a ½–¾ inch furrow down the fertile strip and sow. For hybrid or OP (open pollinated) seeds, sow seeds singly every 2 inches; if you are using male hybrid seeds, sow 3 to a spot – 1 foot apart (thin to one plant as they grow). Outdoor sowing can be done around apple blossom time. Keep the bed moist until the seeds sprout (about 2 weeks). After one month thin to 6 inches apart and side dress with more fertilizer or strong compost. The idea is to encourage fast growth the first year so that you will be able to harvest the following year. Keep the bed weed free! Seeds can also be started indoors 60–90 days prior to the average last frost date (mid-April).

If you did not plant an all male variety, ruthlessly remove any female plants. Around mid-summer the female plants will make seed balls that turn red. Since seed formation is a huge burden on the plant, having an all male bed yields larger and more shoots. Asparagus does not like to be crowded and beds decline mainly due to over crowding from self sown seeds. Removing the female plants and any self sowers will maintain your spacing. If there are gaps, just sow a couple more seeds next spring.



Female Plant

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In the fall or late winter, when the fronds turn brown, cut them down and compost them.

During winter or no later than early spring, cover

the bed with a ½–1 inch layer of finished compost or aged manure, along with fertilizer. Continue to keep the weeds out. The bed will last indefinitely as long as there is good drainage, rich soil, and a weed free bed.

The asparagus beetle is the main pest and persistent problems can be controlled with rotenone and/or neem. Spray often enough so that enough fern fronds remain to create food for the next year's crop. Asparagus can be bothered by rust, Fusarium wilt and Fusarium stem and crown rot. Control root diseases by maintaining good plant vigor.

Harvest your crop the second year. Harvest only those spears as big as your thumb, but exercise restraint to allow the ferns to develop to create more food for the following year. By the third year, the bed should be thick with good sized spears. Cut up to three weeks, or until the size of the shoots begin to decrease. Sit back and enjoy your fresh picked asparagus!

References

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