



Steamed, grilled, or added to anything from pizza to salads, there is nothing quite like asparagus.

# How to Plant Asparagus

This perennial will give you years of one of spring's most delicious crops.

by Claudia Steen for Yakima Valley Master Gardeners

**A**sparagus is a long-lived perennial vegetable. If you planted healthy, disease-free crowns (root systems of one-year old plants grown from seed), each crown should produce 1/2 pound of spears per year for 15 years or more if cared for properly.

Gardeners in zones 4 to 6 have a wider selection of varieties. If you are planting asparagus for the first time this year, you should select fresh, firm, disease-free one-year-old crowns of the all-male/hybrid asparagus varieties (such as Jersey Giant, Jersey Prince, or Jersey Knight) which produce spears. Two-year roots are usually not a bargain as they tend to suffer from transplant shock and do not produce any faster than one-year old crowns.

Seeds produced on female plants will fall to the ground and become a seedling weed problem. Producing these seeds also causes the plant to expend more energy, resulting in a greatly decreased crop. Asparagus can be planted from mid-April to late May; after soil has warmed to 50 degrees. Planting in cold, wet soil could make the plant more susceptible to Fusarium crown rot.

Plant your asparagus at either the west or north side of your garden so that it will not shade other vegetables. Asparagus can tolerate some shade, but

full sun produces more vigorous plants and helps minimize disease. Asparagus grows in most types of soil if there is good drainage. You should have your soil tested for pH before planting. Asparagus prefers a soil pH of 6.5 to 7.5 and will not do well if soil pH is below 6.0.

Plant your asparagus crowns as soon as possible after purchasing. If you can't plant them immediately, wrap them in slightly damp sphagnum moss until you can get them in the ground. To plant your asparagus crowns, dig a furrow no deeper than six inches. Apply one pound of 0-46-0 (triple superphosphate) or two pounds 0-20-0 (superphosphate) fertilizer per 50-foot row in the bottom of the furrow. Toss the crowns into the furrow on top of fertilizer. The plants will grow regardless of how they land so spreading the roots is optional. Space 1.5 feet apart in the row with the rows at least five feet apart. Completely fill the furrows to the original soil level but do not compact the soil. Spears should emerge within one week. Controlling weeds may require weeding by hand, pulling out the weeds early and often. Water regularly the first two years after planting. You might mulch the rows with hay, grass clippings or other organic materials to suppress weeds and retain moisture. As the plants fill in, weeds will be less of a problem.

The first year after planting your asparagus should not be harvested. Spears will elongate and reach a height of 8 to 9 inches and tips will open. The spears will become woody and there will be small branchlets that become ferns. These ferns produce food for the plant and move it down to the crown for the next year's spear production.

Asparagus is drought-tolerant and seeks moisture deep in soil. Some watering might be necessary for vigorous growth.

Harvest asparagus the next year when it is eight to nine inches with tight tips. Do not cut asparagus below the soil with a knife, as that will injure the crown. Asparagus can be harvested several times

during a three-week period, as often as every two to four days. This will also stimulate more bud production on the crown and greater yields for the future. The next year the harvest can be extended from four to six weeks. The third year of harvest and after, you can harvest for six to eight weeks. After harvest, you should snap the spears off at ground level.

Your choice to steam the spears, or a fun treat is to brush the spears with garlic infused oil, wrap the spear in a thin slice of prosciutto and grill them on the barbeque. Enjoy the 'fruits of your labor'.

