

## Asparagus

Asparagus does well on mineral soils with plenty of lime or bone meal to sweeten the soil. If an asparagus bed made up of organic matter is desired, install the bed and allow several months prior to planting so all the organic matter can compost and turn to humus. A good rule of thumb is to build the organic bed in the Fall and plant the Asparagus in the Spring. We feel this is the best rule to follow when building an organic soil bed for any crop. Asparagus crowns can be planted as close as one foot apart. See to it that no two crowns touch each other in the planting hole. A “pyramid” of soil can be mounded and the crown set on top with the Asparagus crown “legs” hanging down the sides of the soil “pyramid”. Commercial growers don’t go to all the trouble, they just scatter the crowns in a shallow trench, again being careful that the crowns don’t touch one another. (crowns in contact with one-another tend to mold). Crowns should be planted in a trench so the top of the crown is well below the soil surface, at least 5 inches deep. After planting the crowns cover with only an inch or two of soil so the emerging spears can easily reach the light of day. After the spears fern out, later in the growing season, the trench can be filled in level with the surrounding garden soil.

Over the years asparagus crowns tend to grow more shallow in the soil. Each year a new crown forms over the last season’s crown and thus the crown grows closer to the soil surface each season. Every 3 years or so it is advised to top dress the crowns with more soil. Over several years a raised bed will actually become apparent. The reason for this is that asparagus needs 3 to 5 inches (or more) of soil maintained over the crown so the spears will develop a good thick caliper as they force their way to the light of day. Spindly spears are more likely the result of shallow crowns, than lack of fertility. Asparagus roots can grow extremely deep in the soil and reach water and nutrients below the root zone of most plants. Established beds are extremely drought resistant and have very low fertilizer needs, compared to most crops.

Avoid deep cultivation that can injure the crown. Asparagus crowns develop special carbohydrate storage roots that are tuber like and can be severely damaged by deep cultivation. A good tip is to maintain about 5 inches of soil over your crowns and cultivate 2 to 3 inches deep for weed control when the crowns are dormant.

In the spring quit harvesting in time to leave several spears on each plant to fern out and grow over the summer. A good rule of thumb is to harvest no more than 6 weeks. If all the spears are cut, the crown will die. In the home garden the smaller, more spindly spears can be left for insurance! In our area quit harvest by May 15th. In the home garden we like to “snap” the spear off with our finger tips. If the spear just bends instead of snapping off in the hand, reach a bit higher on the spear and try again. Once one locates the portion of the spear that will snap off in the hand, one can bet the spears just picked will be tender and not tough and stringy. Large caliper spears that are tough can be peel or “skinned”.

Asparagus Beetles and other beetles such as bean beetles are the major pest on asparagus. The beetles lay eggs on the fern and sooty black little grubs emerge and feed

directly on the fern. Check with your local nursery or feed store for products cleared to use on garden vegetables. We understand that the organic insecticide soaps work very well on the grubs. The important thing is to watch for them and catch them before they have a chance to feed for any length of time. Good Harvesting!

**Mary Washington** - The standard commercial strain and the most popular U.S. variety is resistant to some rust and blight, has a 6 week cutting season. Produces long straight spears with tight tips.

WBN particularly recommends the Mary Washington asparagus variety because the crowns are long lived and well adapted to West Coast conditions. Mary Washington is the hardiest asparagus strain we have test gardened. Asparagus prefers a sweet soil with a pH of 6.8 to 7.2.

**Jersey Knight** - A patented male hybrid seed with very few female seed plants, which are commonly found in open pollinated varieties. Reported to have excellent fusarium tolerance and high resistance to rust. Male plants don't expend energy producing seed and tend to be more vigorous than female plants. This seems to be born out in the test gardens we have witnessed.

**Sweet Purple Asparagus:** This new type of asparagus has many similar characteristics to green asparagus but offers something new for the asparagus connoisseur. The spears produced have several qualities which make it quite different from common green asparagus.

1. The deep-burgundy coloration produced in these spears is the most striking difference between the purple and green varieties.
2. This type has a 20% higher sugar content. Because of this extra sweetness, this vegetable is often eaten raw. Some upscale restaurants garnish salads with purple asparagus. When cooked, the sweetness gives this asparagus a mild, nutty flavor.
3. The spears are generally larger and much more tender than its green counterpart. The vascular bundles have less lignin per spear which make the spears less stringy. This allows the cook to use the entire spear with little waste.