



# Asparagus

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Asparagus is a hardy perennial that can produce for as long as 30 years. Establishing an asparagus bed requires some work and should be placed at the outer reaches of your vegetable garden where it will not be disturbed. Asparagus grows best in soil with excellent drainage. Soil should be amended with compost, manure or other organic material before planting. Soil preparation is often the key to a successful crop.

## How to Plant

Asparagus should be planted as soon as the ground can be worked in spring. It is often sold as bare root asparagus crowns - a compact bud (crown) in the center and long, pencil-like roots trailing from the crown. Plant the roots in a trench 12-18 inches wide and six inches deep. The crowns should be spaced 9-12 inches apart. Spread the roots uniformly with the crown bud facing up, and slightly higher than the roots. Cover the crowns with two inches of soil. Over the course of the summer, gradually fill the remaining portion of the trench as the plants get taller. Asparagus has a tendency to rise as plants mature.

When asparagus grows, the roots spread horizontally. In the first year, top growth is spindly. As the plants age, stems become larger in diameter.

Asparagus plants are dioecious (either male or female.) Female plants develop more spears or stems than male plants, but the stems are smaller. Plant both male and female plants. Female plants drop red berries in late summer. Removing these berries to maintain a healthy crop that is not too thick.

Following freezing weather, asparagus tops should be removed.

Asparagus should be fertilized with an all purpose fertilizer in the spring. For older crops, delay fertilizer application until June or July—this encourages vigorous growth of the fern and stores energy for the next year.

## Harvesting

Asparagus can be harvested after the third year, but for no more than one month. The plant is still expanding its root storage and removing too many spears will weaken the plants. During the fourth year and thereafter, the spears may be harvested from spring through May or June.

Harvest spears 5-8 inches in length by cutting or snapping. To cut a spear, run a knife into the soil at the base of the spear and carefully sever the stem. To snap a spear, grasp near the base and bend toward the ground. The spear breaks at the lowest point where it is free of fiber.