

ASPARAGUS IN THE GARDEN

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SUMMARY

Asparagus prefers a sunny location and fertile, well drained soils. Incorporate plenty of organic matter and phosphorus fertilizer into the area before planting. Plant asparagus crowns 12 inches apart in 8 inch deep furrows in early spring. Cover the crowns with 2 inches of soil and slowly fill the furrows over the rest of the summer. Fertilize the plants with nitrogen after the fern is established and water regularly throughout the summer. Control all pests during the establishment years. Harvest all emerging asparagus spears for 4 weeks beginning 2 years after planting. Harvest can be 6-8 weeks in following years. After harvest, fertilize and water the plants to encourage good fern growth and control pests. When fern die in the fall, mow and mulch them on the beds. Newer all male varieties like Jersey Giant and Jersey Knight perform well in Utah.

RECOMMENDED VARIETIES

Try these newer asparagus varieties which are very productive. Mary Washington is no longer recommended.

| Variety | Yield | Comments |
|----------------|-----------|---|
| Jersey Giant | Excellent | Large, dark green spears, good disease resistance, all-male variety |
| Jersey Knight | Excellent | Large, dark green spears, good disease resistance, all-male variety |
| UC 157 F1 | Excellent | Large, pale green spears, good disease resistance, male/female plants |
| Purple Passion | Good | Large, dark purple spears, male/female plants |

HOW TO GROW

Soils: Asparagus prefers organic, rich, well-drained, sandy soils for best growth. Most soils will do provided they are well drained.

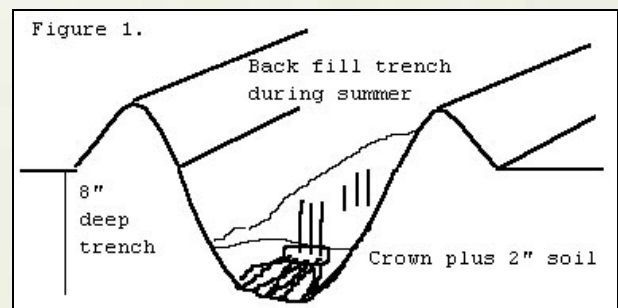
Soil Preparation: Before planting, control all perennial weeds. Incorporate 2-4 inches of well composted organic matter. Apply 1/2 pounds of high phosphate (11-52-0) fertilizer per 100 square feet of planted area. Work compost and fertilizer into soil to a depth of 6 inches.

Plants: Purchase quality 1 year-old crowns from local garden centers or seed catalogs. Crowns should have 8-10 large roots and a healthy bud cluster. You may also establish asparagus from transplants grown from seed. Plant seed in January for transplanting in April.

Planting and Spacing: Asparagus crowns should be planted in 8 inch deep furrows in April (Figure 1). Space plants 12 inches apart in the row, with rows 3-4 feet apart. Cover crowns with 2 inches of soil. Add additional soil to the furrow by cultivation during the year but do not bury those fern already established.

Water: During the first 2 years after planting water frequently by supplying 1 to 2 inches per week in one application. Use drip irrigation if possible. Mulch around the plant with compost or grass clippings to conserve soil moisture and reduce weed growth. Irrigation can be reduced to every 2-3 weeks after year 4. Irrigate so that moisture goes down to 4 feet in the soil.

Fertilization: After harvest, fertilize with a complete fertilizer (16-16-8) using about 3/4 lb. per 100 square feet.



Establishment: Maintain healthy fern growth during the first 2 years to ensure asparagus produces for a long time. Control weeds and insects. Water deeply to ensure good root growth. Do not harvest asparagus until the 2nd year after planting.

PROBLEMS

Weeds: Control all perennial weeds and grasses in asparagus. Mulch asparagus heavily (2-3 inches) with compost each year. "Round-up" herbicide may be applied to weeds before or after the harvest period. Avoid spraying "Round-up" on asparagus plants. Avoid tilling asparagus as damage to the roots may occur.

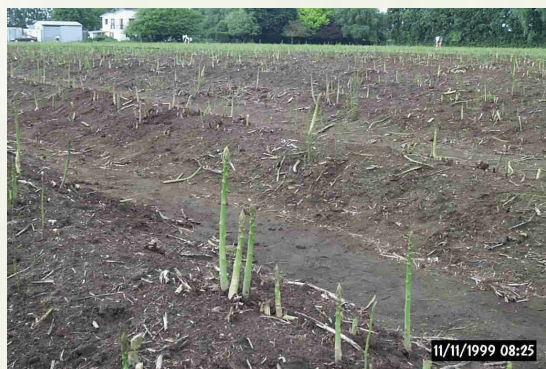
| Insects | Description and Symptoms | Control |
|-------------------|---|---|
| Asparagus aphid | Green plant sucking insects that stunt fern and reduce yield and plant vigor. | Use insecticidal soaps or labeled insecticides. |
| Asparagus beetle | Beetles are black or orange and have 6 or 12 spots on their wings. Larvae feed on fern which reduces leaf area and plant vigor. Adults feed on emerging spears in spring. | Used insecticides labeled for this pest. |
| Diseases | Symptoms | Control |
| Root Rot diseases | Fungal diseases reduce plant vigor and stands. Tips of fern turn yellow, growing points die, whole stems and plants eventually die. Spears are small and skinny. | Reduce plant stress. Stresses include insects, over-watering, over cutting, drought, and weed pressure. |
| Viruses | Viruses cause plants to decline and die and yields to go down. | Control aphids which transmit the disease. |

HARVEST AND STORAGE

Harvesting: Asparagus harvest begins 2 years after planting. Plants may be harvested for up to 4 weeks the first year. Cut 9 inch tall spears at ground level. Remove all emerging spears during harvest since tall growing spears suppress further spear growth. Harvest for 6-8 weeks from year 5. Stop harvesting when the majority of spears are smaller than a pencil in diameter.

After Harvest Plant Care: After harvest is completed, control weeds and then allow spears to develop into fern. Fertilize the beds, water regularly, and control pests. After ferns die in the fall, mow them down and use as a soil mulch. Avoid tilling asparagus beds since this damages the crown.

Productivity: A mature asparagus plant can produce ½ to ¾ pound of spears during the complete harvest period. Plant approximately 20 plants per family member in order to have sufficient spears for fresh consumption and storage purposes. Spears will store for 3-5 days under refrigeration.



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

How long will asparagus last? Expect the plant to produce spears for 10-15 years.

Why are the spears always skinny? Plants may have been water stressed last summer when the spears formed or the plant did not store enough food for good spear growth. As the harvest season progresses spear size naturally decreases.

Can you harvest asparagus at other times of the year beside spring? You can but generally these plants do not yield well and the life span of the bed is greatly reduced.

Can you grow white asparagus in Utah? Yes but you need to mound soil over the planted bed and then cut the spears just as they poke through the soil. If light gets to the spear it will turn green. Use black plastic in the spring to cover the beds. This will keep the light out.

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