

ASPARAGUS

Gardening tips provided by
Jefferson Farm & Gardens



Overview

Asparagus, *Asparagus officinalis*, is a perennial vegetable of the onion family, and a planting can produce spears for up to 20 years. Asparagus plants are either male or female. Male plants produce thicker spears than female plants because female plants put a considerable amount of energy into producing seeds. Those seeds can germinate and become weeds in subsequent years. All-male hybrids are now available to the home gardener. Asparagus is rich in folic acid and potassium.

Choosing Varieties

There are several varieties of asparagus available that differ in height, color, and disease resistance, as well as other traits. A few recommended varieties for Missouri and other Midwest states are:

- Jersey Giant (all male, high disease tolerance)
- Jersey Knight (all male, tolerates heat)
- Mary Washington (male and female, prolific)
- Purple Passion (male and female, sweet)

It is recommended to try a few varieties to determine overall plant performance and personal preference.

Planting Tips

Since asparagus will be productive for many years, an area needs to be selected where it will neither be disturbed nor interfere with the rest of the garden.

Asparagus is often planted as crowns rather than grown from seed because the crowns will produce earlier. In Missouri, asparagus can be planted in mid-April. A trench should be dug that is about 8 inches deep. Crowns should be laid out so they are about 1 foot apart in rows about 5 feet apart. They should be covered with about 2 inches of soil and watered in. As spears grow, several inches of soil can be replaced at a time to gradually fill in the trench in the first year.

Soil Fertility and Pest Control

Asparagus crowns should be planted in well-drained soils and would benefit from the addition of nutrients either in the form of a complete fertilizer or aged compost. Asparagus would benefit from watering during an extended dry

spell during the first year of establishment, but it cannot tolerate waterlogged soils.

Controlling weeds is important to eliminate the competition for nutrients. During the summer, a thick layer of mulch can be applied to deter weeds and conserve moisture. Asparagus is salt tolerant, but using salt as a weed killer is not recommended because it inhibits water infiltration into the soil and could injure nearby vegetables.

Asparagus beetles and larvae can cause damage by feeding on spears and ferns. Beetles can be handpicked or controlled with chemicals containing the organic compound pyrethrin (be sure to follow product labels).

Harvesting

Asparagus should not be harvested the same year of planting. Spears can be harvested for about 2 weeks during the second spring after planting crowns. Each following spring, asparagus can be harvested for 6-8 weeks. Spears that are 6-8 inches tall and have tight buds should be harvested; plants need to be checked daily when temperatures exceed 72°F. Spears can be harvested by bending a spear until it snaps, ensuring that the entire stalk is edible while leaving the fibrous stump behind. Cease harvesting when the spears produced are the diameter of a pencil. Those spears should be allowed to grow into ferns to supply the crown with nutrients for next spring's growth. Ferns can be left during the winter and can be removed in early spring.

Seed Sources

Asparagus crowns can be purchased from local garden centers or ordered from mail order companies via phone or website. Daisy Farms (1-269-782-6321, daisyfarms.net) and Territorial Seed Company (1-800-626-0866, territorialseed.com) are two companies that sell asparagus varieties.

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