



Harvest of the Month

Asparagus



Social Sciences

Asparagus is native to Europe and western temperate regions of Asia. It has been prized as a gourmet delicacy since the time of the Roman empire. Asparagus was brought to North America by European settlers at least as early as 1655. In 1685 one of William Penn's advertisements for Pennsylvania included asparagus in a list of crops that grew well in the American climate.

Asparagus is still a well-loved Spring vegetable in many European countries; in the UK asparagus season officially begins on April 23rd, and in Germany there are asparagus festivals throughout the months of April and May.

Commercially, China grows most of the world's asparagus. In the US, Michigan is the top producing state, with California coming in second or third behind Washington.

Fun Fact

A recipe for cooking asparagus is given in one of the oldest surviving collections of recipes (Apicius's 1st century AD *De re coquinaria*, Book III).

Botany

Asparagus is a perennial crop in the family Asparagaceae. There are not any other common food crops in the asparagus family. Asparagus is a monocot, which is an early taxonomic differentiation in the flowering plants from most common temperate garden vegetables, which are dicots. This makes asparagus more closely related to grasses and grain crops than the leafy vegetables that are harvested at a similar time to asparagus.

Espárragos means asparagus in Spanish.

Nutrition

Asparagus is a high fiber food that is a rich source of copper and vitamin K. It also contains moderate amounts of iron and the B vitamins thiamine, riboflavin, and folate.

Growing Tips

Asparagus is a wonderful garden crop. It is low maintenance, easy to grow, and there is nothing like those first tender shoots in the Spring! There are a couple of “cons” to growing asparagus in the garden, however. It takes a significant investment in time and space before you get to harvest your first crop. But, if you plan well and be patient, an asparagus bed can be productive for 20 or 30 years!

Planting: Asparagus is most commonly planted as 2 year old roots in the Spring. This allows you to make your first small harvest the next year and a full harvest the following year. Asparagus can be planted from seed, but then you must wait 3 years before your first harvest. Be sure to prep the soil well before planting, as once the plants are in the ground they will be there for a long time and you can do very little soil disturbance. Dig the bed deeply and incorporate as much high-quality compost or composted manure as you can. Space asparagus plants at least 18” apart.

Care & Maintenance

Asparagus beds need regular water, but water deeply and less often rather than a shallow sprinkling more often. The best way to fertilize an asparagus bed is to mulch it each winter with a layer of nitrogen rich compost after you have cut off the flowering stalks. Alternatively, you can provide a foliar feed during the early Spring as production starts.

Tip for white asparagus: White asparagus is produced by applying a blanching technique while the asparagus shoots are growing. The shoots are covered with soil as they grow; without exposure to sunlight, there is no photosynthesis and the shoots remain white.

Harvest

Avoid the temptation to harvest from a new bed too soon or too heavily. The longer you wait, the stronger the plants will be. The spears are best harvested when about 6-8” is above ground and the flower heads are still tightly closed. Don't harvest too many spears from a single root in one season. Cut from a bed for 2 weeks when the plants are a few years old, up to 6 weeks for well-established plants. Then leave it to flower and regenerate. Stop harvesting off a bed if all the spears are thin.

