

Ohio State University
Extension Fact Sheet
Horticulture and Crop Science
2021 Coffey Rd., Columbus, Ohio 43210-1086



Growing Asparagus In The Home Garden

HYG-1603-94

Carl J. Cantaluppi

Asparagus is a long-lived perennial vegetable crop that is enjoyed by many gardeners. It can be productive for 15 or more years if given proper care.

Soil requirements

Asparagus grows in most any soil as long as it has good internal drainage. Asparagus roots do not like waterlogged soils that will lead to root rot.

Planting

Buy one-year-old, healthy, disease-free crowns from a reputable crown grower. A crown is the root system of a one-year-old asparagus plant that is grown from seed. Each crown can produce 1/2 lb. of spears per year when fully established

Select the new all-male hybrid asparagus varieties such as Jersey Giant, Jersey Prince, and Jersey Knight. These varieties produce spears only on male plants. Female plants have to expend more energy to produce seeds, that decreases the yields of asparagus spears on female plants.

Asparagus can be planted throughout Ohio from mid-April to late May after the soil has warmed up to about 50 degrees F. Plant the asparagus at either the west or north side of the garden so that it will not shade the other vegetables and will not be injured when the rest of the garden is tilled.

Dig a furrow no deeper than 5 to 6 inches. Research has shown that the deeper asparagus crowns are planted, the more the total yield is reduced. Apply about 1 lb. of 0-46-0 (triple superphosphate) or 2 lbs. of 0-20-0 (superphosphate) fertilizer per 50 feet of row in the bottom of the furrow before planting. This will make phosphorus immediately available to the crowns. Omitting this procedure will result in decreased yields and the spear production will not be as vigorous. Space the crowns 1-1/2 feet apart in the row. If more than one row is planted, space the rows five feet apart from center to center.

Do not harvest the asparagus during the planting year.

Asparagus is very drought tolerant and can usually grow without supplemental watering because it seeks moisture deep in the soil. However, if rainfall is insufficient when planting or afterwards, it is beneficial to irrigate the crowns.

Insects and Diseases

Inspect the ferns throughout the season for insect feeding and fern dieback. Asparagus beetles chew on the fern, causing the stem to turn brown and reducing the yield the next year. Spray the ferns with an approved insecticide when beetles are seen. For disease prevention, spray with an approved fungicide on a 7 to 14 day schedule beginning when the ferns reach a 3 to 4 foot height and continuing until mid September.

Do not cut down the fern growth at the end of the growing season. The all-male hybrids stay green until frost, enabling photosynthesis to occur longer throughout the season. Leave the dead fern growth intact over the winter. This catches snow for additional soil moisture and keeps the soil temperature about 5 degrees F cooler than bare soil with no covering of dead fern. The cooler soil temperature is helpful in delaying the early emergence of asparagus in the spring, when air temperatures might rise prematurely and then fall again, predisposing the spears to frost damage. Frost-damaged spears should be snapped and discarded.

Remove the old fern growth by cutting or mowing as low as possible during the first week of April in central Ohio. Dead stalks are very sharp and can easily skin knuckles when harvesting new spears.

Weed Control

Weed control can be accomplished by hand hoeing and cultivating during the planting year since there are no herbicides labeled for use in asparagus during the first year. Labeled pre-emergence herbicides may be used during the second spring, by applying it over the shredded fern, about three weeks before spear emergence (April 1st in central Ohio). Do not use salt as a weed killer. It will not harm the asparagus, but it inhibits water penetration in the soil. Also, rains can leach the salt out of the asparagus bed and into the rest of the garden, injuring other vegetables that are less salt tolerant than asparagus.

Harvesting

Harvest asparagus by snapping 7 to 9 inch spears with tight tips. The small stub that is left in the soil after snapping, dries up and disintegrates. A new spear does not come up at the same spot, but comes up from another bud that enlarges on another part of the crown.

As the tips of the spears start to loosen (known as "ferning out"), fiber begins to develop at the base of the spears, causing them to become tough. The diameter of the spear has no bearing on its toughness. When harvesting, the asparagus patch should be picked clean, never allowing any spears to fern out, as this gives asparagus beetles an excellent site to lay their eggs.

The year after planting, asparagus can be harvested several times throughout a three-week period, depending on air temperatures. Research shows there is no need to wait two years after planting before harvesting. In fact, harvesting the year after planting will stimulate more bud production on the crown and provide greater yields in future years, as compared with waiting two years before harvesting.

Asparagus spears will start to emerge when the soil temperature reaches 50 degrees F. After this, growth of asparagus is dependent on air temperature. Early in the season, 7 to 9 inch spears might be harvested every 2 to 4 days. As air temperatures increase, harvesting frequencies will increase to once or twice per day, harvesting 5 to 7 inch spears before the tips start to fern out and lose quality. The second year after planting, the length of harvest can increase to about 4 to 6 weeks. The third year after planting and thereafter, harvesting can continue for 6 to 8 weeks. Since the length of harvest season will vary from year-to-year depending on air temperature, stop the harvest when the diameter of 3/4 of the spears becomes small (less than 3/8 inch). Experience gained by growing the crop will make it easier for the

gardener to know when to discontinue the harvest.