

Asparagus

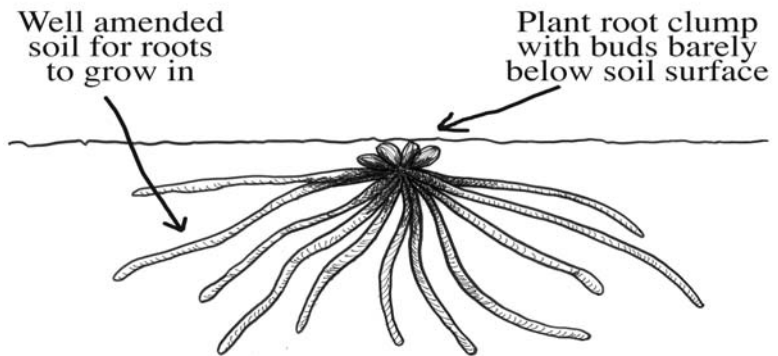
Location and Selection

Asparagus need a lot of sunlight to produce good spears. They are best grown in an area that receives full sun. There are many good varieties of asparagus. 'Mary Washington' has been a popular variety for many years because of its thick, straight, dark green spears and plentiful harvest. Or consider a "male" variety such as 'Jersey Giant'. Male varieties produce more spears per plant. They also do not produce fruit so they don't drop any seed which can become an invasive nuisance. There are also purple varieties which have a sweeter, "nuttier" flavor.

Planting

When preparing your asparagus bed you are building the foundation for many years of production. Asparagus demand good drainage so take the time to work the soil to a depth of 1 foot or more and add plenty of decomposed organic material like **Soil Pep** or Compost.

Asparagus is usually planted in rows about 2'-4' apart. Space the plants 12"-18" along the row. Dig a good-sized hole where each plant will go. When planting, spread the roots out in a circular fashion and place them in the hole so that the buds at the top of the crown are just barely covered by the soil surface. Be careful not to damage that shallow crown when cultivating.



Maintenance

Cultivate and water as necessary. Contrary to what many people believe, asparagus don't need a lot of water. Soak the plants well when you do water but allow the soil to dry out a bit before soaking the bed again. To encourage heavy top growth and thick spears,

follow a twice-a-year feeding program. Make one application of a high nitrogen fertilizer such as **Bookcliff Gardens Choice Pro Turf Food** in early spring before spears appear and again in late spring once the harvest is completed. Very early in the spring, cut down the dried brown foliage to ground level.

A mature plant produces about 20-25 edible spears per season. Good spear production depends on good fern growth, so be sure to take care of your bed after harvesting has been completed. Continue to cultivate, irrigate and watch for pests.



Harvesting

No cutting should be done the first year. Allow the plant to grow and build itself up. During the second year, only a few stalks should be removed. The third year after planting, you should be able to really start harvesting asparagus. The weather plays an important role in determining when your asparagus will be ready for harvesting. Start checking in mid to late April. You may begin cutting whenever spears reach three-eighths inch in diameter. Thinner spears should be allowed to grow into ferns. Snap or cut the stalks off just below the soil surface. Do not leave stubs because these will jab your fingers when making future harvests.

As the root reserves are depleted, the stalks will get thinner. When all stalks that are being produced are three-eighths inch or smaller in diameter, it is time to stop harvesting. All spears must now develop into ferns. This will ensure the maximum yield for the following year.

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