



Growing Asparagus in Home Gardens

A quick guide to asparagus

- An asparagus plant can last 15 years. Choose its spot in the garden carefully.
- You can start asparagus from seed or from one-year-old roots, called crowns.
- Crowns grow vertically and horizontally. Planting at the right depth is important.
- Good soil moisture is important at planting for good root and fern growth.
- Begin harvest two years after planting crowns, and three years after planting seeds.
- Harvest spears until June 30, then allow the large feathery ferns to develop.

Asparagus (Asparagus officinalis)

Asparagus is one of the earliest harvested vegetables each spring. Asparagus spears are crisp, tender and flavorful. The asparagus harvest season lasts about 6 to 8 weeks, from early May to late June in Minnesota.

In the peak of asparagus season, spears can grow up to 2 inches per day, producing bountiful harvests for gardeners to enjoy.

How asparagus grows

Asparagus is a unique crop. It is one of the few perennial vegetables grown in Minnesota; others include horseradish and rhubarb.

The edible parts of the plant are called the spears. These are technically the stems of the plants. The spears emerge from underground buds at the base of the root system. These buds and roots are called “crowns.” If spears are left to grow, they develop leaves and are called ferns.

We only harvest asparagus for two months instead of the entire season because the plants need time for the ferns to grow and build up energy for the next year.

The fern creates energy that will be stored in the underground portion of the plant to produce the following year’s spears. It is important to take care of the ferns even after the harvest is over to ensure good future harvests.

Soil pH and fertility for asparagus

Asparagus grows best in well-drained soils with a pH between 6.5 and 7.0; it does not tolerate extremely acidic soils. It can grow in heavy, medium, or sandy soils, as long as the soils be well-drained and do not exhibit pooling water after rains.

Before planting asparagus, have your soil tested to see if the soil has the right amount of nutrients for asparagus to thrive. Add recommended fertilizer based on the soil test results. It is best to add part of the fertilizer in the fall or spring before planting, but about half of the phosphorus and potassium should be added at the time of planting. Nitrogen should be added after planting, once the crowns begin growing.

Once an asparagus patch is established, it is best to test the soil every three years and follow the test recommendations before adding nutrients. After the asparagus patch is established, fertilizer, compost or composted manure can be added either in early spring before spear emergence, or after harvest in late June or early July. Only add these inputs if they are needed according to the soil test.

Selecting plants

- There are female plants and male plants. This means the plants are dioecious.
- All produce edible spears.
 - Only plants with all female flowers produce red, inedible berries in summer.
 - Female plants grow larger spears.
 - Male plants grow a greater number of smaller, uniform spears.
- Most hybrids, such as Jersey Giant, are plants with only male flowers that produce no seeds.
 - Plants with all male flowers do not use energy to develop seeds and fruits.
 - Male asparagus plants tend to live longer and produce more spears.
- Female plants can produce undesirable weedy seedling asparagus plants.

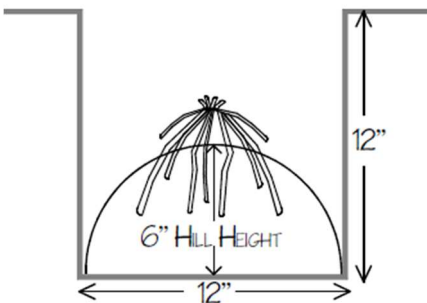
Varieties recommended for Minnesota:

- Millennium: A newer variety from the University of Guelph. It is very vigorous and high-yielding.
- The “Jersey” series: These varieties were recently discontinued but still grow in many Minnesota gardens. Varieties include Jersey Giant, Jersey Knight, and Jersey Supreme. The Jersey varieties are popular and very high-yielding.
 - They can be damaged at -30° F if there is not enough snow cover.
- Mary Washington: Open-pollinated variety. Yields are lower than the Jersey varieties, but they are very cold-hardy. Because it is open-pollinated, it may produce seeds that sprout new plants. Some gardeners consider that a benefit, while others consider it a nuisance.
- Viking KB-3: An open-pollinated variety.
- Purple Passion: A purple, open-pollinated variety.
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Planting asparagus

Choose a good location an asparagus planting can last 15 years or more, so choose the spot for an asparagus bed carefully.

- Choose a fertile, sunny, well-drained site with soil that holds moisture well.
- Late spring frosts can kill emerged spears, so find an area that is not low-lying or exposed to frost.
- Asparagus plants have deep root systems. Avoid areas with shallow soils, or soils prone to water-saturation.
- If the asparagus bed is to be part of a larger vegetable garden, the best place is at the north end of the garden, so that the tall ferns do not shade the other crops.



Dig hole 12" x 12", build 6" high hill inside of hole. Fan out roots over hill and cover with 6" of soil. Place roots 2 feet apart in rows. Make sure to mulch well. Native pine bark is recommended.