



Spring is here and you know what that means... its asparagus season. Asparagus is the favorite perennial vegetable. If you happen to be one that loves this vegetable, you can grow it yourself with a little know-how.

Asparagus is a unique plant. It was once classified in the Lily family, but has been split out into its own family, *Asparagaceae*. This perennial plant is dioecious, which means it has separate male and female plants. The sex of the plant is important when you start choosing hybrids. The male asparagus varieties will produce more spears that are larger than the female varieties. Some of the more common hybrids include 'Jersey Giant,' 'Jersey Supreme,' 'Jersey Knight,' and my favorite 'Purple Passion.' If you have an older female hybrid that gets red berries (seeds), it is probably a 'Martha Washington.'

The location is just as important as the type of asparagus that you plant. The plants require a site that receives full sun, at least 6-8 hours of sunlight, and has good quality, well-drained soil. Asparagus does not do well in heavy clay or soggy soils. In less-than-ideal conditions, asparagus may still produce, but it won't be as prolific.

Planting your own asparagus bed will ensure you will have a constant supply every spring. Seeds and crowns are a couple of options when it comes to purchasing asparagus to grow. As soon as the soil can be worked in the spring, the asparagus can be planted. Planting seeds will require more time until you can harvest compared to using crowns. Seeds will need to be planted indoors then transplanted into the location. Crowns should be planted 12-18" apart in a trench 4-6" deep, but only covered with one inch of soil. Once the crowns start to grow and emerge through the soil, cover them with an additional soil a little at a time. Throughout the summer, gradually cover the plants with a little soil as they emerge until the furrow is filled. Once planted, water thoroughly and be sure to water throughout the season. Water stressed plants are more susceptible to insects, disease, and weed pressures and drought stress can even influence next years' yields.

The next step requires a little patience on your part. For the long-term success of the patch, a newly planted asparagus patch should not be picked in the first year of establishment. It might be tough, but you want the asparagus to put all its energy into producing a good root system instead of those yummy spears. Allow the plant to produce its fern-like foliage and let them stand throughout the rest of the growing season. The following year, year two, you can harvest lightly for about a 2-week period then allow the spears to turn to ferns. Finally, in year three you can harvest spears normally, stopping harvest when the spears become woody and tough.

To ensure a successful asparagus patch for years to come, allow the patch to 'fern-out' and stand. This is when the plants grow to full size and have fern-like appearance once harvest has stopped for the year. It allows the plant to produce food and store its crown, ensuring a good crop next year and for years to come. Once the foliage turns yellow in the fall, it can be cut back if desired or allowed to stand for winter interest.

Contrary to popular belief, salt is not the best option for controlling weeds in asparagus. Asparagus has a deep root system and is somewhat salt tolerant. When salt was applied to the asparagus patch, the shallow rooted weeds die, and the asparagus appears to be unharmed. Using salt is not a recommended method of controlling weeds. Eventually the accumulation of salt damages the soil structure and can create a crust that doesn't allow water to be absorbed. Pulling or using herbicides are much better methods for weed control.

With a little work, and a lot of patience, you can establish your own bed of asparagus that will produce for years to come.

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