

Growing Asparagus

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

While there are probably many homeowners and gardeners who don't really care if they have asparagus growing in their yard or garden, there are many of us who do like asparagus! Most home gardeners can probably successfully grow asparagus if they have a sunny, well drained location.

Asparagus is a perennial plant that once established and well cared for can last for decades quite easily. Asparagus originated in a wide area of Europe, western Asia and northern Africa. It is a true vegetable, unlike many of the botanical fruits that we often call vegetables. We eat the immature stem of the plant. It is an excellent source of vitamin A and contains important amounts of calcium, phosphorus, riboflavin and vitamin C. It's one of the first fresh vegetables of the spring in home gardens and home grown asparagus is far superior in flavor than what is shipped in to most stores.

Asparagus is not a crop for the impatient gardeners. You will not have asparagus to use the year you plant it. With proper care and establishment you will have a limited amount of asparagus the second year and by the fourth year you should be into full production. But since next year's crop is directly related to the care you give the crop this year, you have to stop harvesting after about six to eight weeks with a mature planting.

You start an asparagus bed by planting one year old crowns. Sometimes you'll get two year old crowns and really adventuresome gardeners will start asparagus by seed. Asparagus is often best started by preparing an area a year ahead of time. We recommend setting up your bed in a corner of the garden where it won't be disturbed. A year ahead of time add one half to one pound of organic matter (compost, barnyard manure, rotted sawdust, old silage) per square foot of asparagus bed. So if you have a ten by ten bed, 100 square feet, then you'd add 50 to 100 pounds of organic matter and work this into the soil. Allow this to break down over the summer. Keep the weeds controlled and then plow or till the area in the fall, adding 4 to 5 pounds of a 5-10-5 fertilizer before you start planting in the spring.

When you plant the crowns, dig a trench 8 to 9 inches deep and one shovel width wide. Unless you are planning to grow a lot of asparagus, most gardeners will just have one row. If you have two rows, make the rows 4 to 5 feet apart. Place the crowns with the roots spread evenly out about 18 to 24 inches apart in the row. Initially cover with 2 to 3 inches of soil. Do not completely fill the trench to begin with. But as the crowns start to grow, gradually add soil through the first growing season. This covers up the small weeds that may start growing but keeps part of the asparagus plant in the sunlight. By the end of the planting year the trench is completely filled. Normal planting season is mid March to mid April.

Weed control is important with shallow hoeing, herbicides or mulch. Keep the bed well watered to keep the plants growing. After the plants have died down in the fall, carefully cut off the tops at ground level. The year after planting, if the new shoots are at least the size of a pencil, you can harvest for about 3 weeks, but then stop, fertilize again and let the plants build up size, continuing to control weeds.

Asparagus is well suited to our Kansas gardens. Normally you can expect 8 to 10 pounds of asparagus per 100 square feet of well maintained bed. For more information, stop by the Extension Office and ask for our bulletin on asparagus.