

How to Grow Asparagus



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Asparagus is one of those vegetables that, if you have the room, you really should make an effort to grow. Being a perennial, the plant is fairly low maintenance – that is, after the work needed to establish a bed. Also, it's one of the few garden vegetables where the economy of growing it yourself is obvious; after all, the price at the grocery store is pretty outrageous most of the year!

Seed is typically the more economical way to establish an asparagus bed. Additionally, plants started from seed are much less likely to carry some of the diseases that can plague asparagus, such as fusarium or rust.

Asparagus seedlings can be somewhat touchy about transplanting. For this reason, it's better not to start it in a community flat. Instead, sow seed into individual 3-4 inch pots (peat pots are best), with about $\frac{1}{4}$ inch of soil over the seed. Bottom water until the top of the soil is visibly moist, then remove the water and let them drain for at least 15 minutes. Next move the pots to a warm spot, preferably at around 70F. Since the seed will take some time to come up (usually





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2-3 weeks in warm conditions), it's a good idea to cover them with clear plastic so they retain their moisture. Another option is to seal them in Zip-Loc bags.

The bed should be prepared well ahead of transplanting time; during the previous fall if possible. Add several inches of compost or well-rotted manure on top of the row (or bed, depending on how you are going to arrange things). If the soil is very acid (pH below 6.0), add lime as well; asparagus prefers a pH in the range of 6.0-6.7. Work the whole mess into the top 12 inches of soil. Good winter drainage is critical, so locate your asparagus patch carefully. If you live in a soggy location consider building a high raised bed.

Seedlings shouldn't be set out until after your last usual spring frost date. In either case, when you are ready to transplant, add about 2 cups of a complete organic fertilizer for every 10 row feet (chemical recommendations are 3-5 pounds of 5-10-10 per 100 square feet of bed) and work it into the soil. Next you need to dig a trench: If you are in a cold climate (USDA zone 6 or below), dig down 8-12 inches in the spot where the row is desired. For milder climates a shallower trench is needed, only 2-4 inches. The plants should be placed at the bottom of the trench, 12 inches between plants in rows 2-4 feet apart. Cover with 1-2 inches of soil, and water them in to make sure you don't have air pockets.



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As the plants grow over the next few weeks, push more dirt back into the trench until it is level with the surrounding soil. As you do this, though, be sure not to completely cover the growing points of the plants.

For the first two seasons no harvest should occur. You should, however, fertilize (at the same level as before) in late spring. The following season you should only harvest spears for a week or two, and then let them grow. After that, a good rule of thumb is to harvest until the larger new spears are no bigger around than a pencil; then leave the plants alone. Asparagus is a heavy feeder, and will need to be fed twice: Once when the plants are just breaking dormancy, and again when you are finished harvesting for the year. The plants may take 5-6 years to reach maturity, but your patience will be rewarded – mature asparagus plants can often be harvested for up to 8 weeks!

It is best to harvest asparagus spears by hand, breaking them off near the soil level. Knives can be used, but be careful not to damage neighboring spears; otherwise they may rot.

Once you stop harvesting, the spears grow into quite beautiful ferns. On good soil these can get 6-7 feet tall. The ferns should be left alone until killed by frost, and then removed. In cold-winter areas, the ferns can be left until spring; their fronds help catch and hold snow, which somewhat insulates the root crowns.

Asparagus is bothered primarily by two pests. Slugs love to chew on young asparagus, so bait or traps are a good idea. The Asparagus Beetle enjoys dining on the mature ferns. These can be hand-picked, or controlled with 5% rotenone (a botanical poison).