

ASPARAGUS

Vegetable Gardens



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Asparagus (*Asparagus officinalis* L.) is a favorite home garden vegetable throughout Kansas. It is, generally, the first fresh vegetable to be harvested in the spring, which makes it a welcome addition to the garden. A perennial crop, well cared for asparagus will last 15 years or more without replanting. It is well suited not only for use fresh but also for canning or freezing. Asparagus is an excellent source of vitamin A and it contains important amounts of calcium, phosphorus, riboflavin and vitamin C. Flavor of fresh-harvested, home garden asparagus is superior to flavor of asparagus shipped to Kansas from other areas.

Varieties

Newer hybrids such as UC157, Jersey Giant, Ida Lea, Jersey Knight, Jersey General, and others are very productive and well worth the extra cost of crowns. They are dark green, rust resistant, vigorous, and of high quality. Numerous other varieties or strains, including Waltham Washington are improvements.

Establishing an Asparagus Planting

Because asparagus plantings will be in the same location many years, it is especially important to prepare the soil thoroughly before planting. Fall plowing after incorporating generous quantities of organic matter is recommended. Barnyard manure, rotted sawdust, or compost at 500 to 1,000 pounds per 1,000 square feet will be beneficial. As the asparagus planting will not be plowed up year to year, it is important to put it at the side of the garden area.

Fertilization

Fertilizer should be applied to the soil before fall plowing to establish a new planting. Adding 8 to 10 pounds of a 5-10-5 fertilizer per 1,000 square feet of garden area is suggested, if no soil test is available to indicate fertilizer need. If generous applications of organic matter are applied, use only half so much 5-10-5 fertilizer.

To establish planting, 4 to 5 pounds of 5-10-5 fertilizer (or the equivalent) per 1,000 square feet is recommended. It should be spread over the asparagus bed extremely early in spring and incorporated lightly with a rotary tiller or rake before any spears emerge.

After an asparagus planting comes into production and is harvested, after harvest, usually in June, a sidedressing of nitrogen fertilizer is recommended to ensure vigorous summer growth. One pound of actual nitrogen per 1,000 square feet should be applied to the soil surface.

Plants

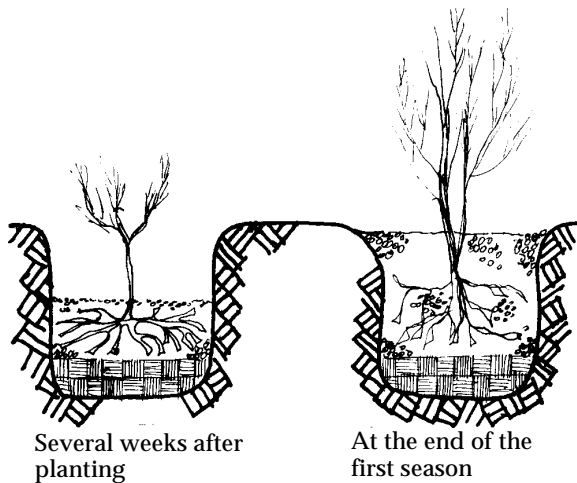
Asparagus is planted by purchasing 1-year-old "crowns" or roots from a garden dealer, seed supplier or nurseryman. It is possible to start asparagus from seed, but takes an additional year to produce a crown ready to be transplanted. It is better to purchase crowns rather than to start with seed. You can also start asparagus from seedling transplants set in early May. Transplants need to be 8 to 10 weeks old before transplanting.

Planting

Crowns should be set deeply in the soil. Dig a trench 8 to 9 inches deep and place the crowns at the bottom. Space crowns about 18 to 24 inches apart in the trench. Rows should be 4 to 5 feet apart, but one row generally suffices.

Initially cover the crowns with 2 to 3 inches of soil and firm the soil well around the crowns. Do not fill in the entire trench at once. Gradually add soil to fill the trench as the plant grows; that covers small weeds and they die for lack of light. By the end of the first season, the trench is completely filled in.

Crowns should be planted in Kansas March 15 to April 15.



Care of a New or Established Planting

Established asparagus beds, with little care, will remain productive many years; but several practices need to be followed to ensure successful crops. Care is especially important during the first one or two growing seasons when the plants are getting established.

It is important to control weeds in the planting. Weeds can be mechanically controlled with a hoe, cultivator, rotary tiller, etc., but tillage should not be deeper than 2 to 3 inches to avoid root damage. Several chemicals can be used for weed control. A popular one available for home gardeners is simazine (Princep 80W). If used, it should be applied to weed-free soil before and after the cutting seasons on established beds. After the planting is established, discing, rototilling, or raking lightly to control established weeds is in order. A second application of herbicide can be applied to reduce weed growth, or hoeing in the row and rototilling between rows can be effective. As the plants grow, they provide shade that helps control weeds. Read all label instructions before applying any weed control chemical.

Tops should not be removed from asparagus plants the first two seasons until after killing freezes. The tops are essential in producing and transferring food to the roots for a vigorous crop the next spring. Some gardeners like to remove old tops at the end of the season to clean up the garden area, while others prefer to leave the tops for a winter wind or snow barrier.

Asparagus makes an attractive screen to enclose a garden. The tops grow 4 to 6 feet tall and act as a windbreak during summer months. One can mow up close to the plants, and grass from a lawn acts as a mulch and helps prevent weed growth. To keep the plants from falling over, set posts 10 to 12 feet apart and pull the plants up straight with wire or cord tied to the posts.

Harvesting

Because the vigor of an asparagus planting depends on the food reserves transported to the roots during the previous season, it should not be harvested the first year from crowns. The next season, limit harvest to 3 to 4 weeks, or until spear size rapidly decreases in diameter. During the third season, regular harvest can begin. Asparagus can be harvested for 6 to 8 weeks in the spring. Newer hybrid varieties will be more productive the first and second cutting year.

Most gardeners prefer to harvest young, tender spears from 5 to 10 inches long. Asparagus in Manhattan, Kansas, gardens, for example, normally can be harvested by mid-April. Spear growth depends on temperature. If it is warm, the asparagus may need to be harvested every three days; if hot, harvest may be necessary every day. Harvest while the tips of the spears are still tight. If some spears become too large, cut them and discard them. New spears will then emerge. Cut the spears or shoots with a sharp knife 1 to 2 inches below the soil surface or snap or cut the spears at the soil surface. Care should be taken to cut only the spear you want to harvest and not damage other young spears just under the soil surface.

Asparagus can then be trimmed and washed for eating. It can be prepared fresh or it may be canned or frozen. A well-tended planting should yield 80 to 100 pounds of fresh asparagus a year from 1,000 square feet of bed space

Asparagus Problems

Asparagus rust—Rust first appears as small, reddish-brown spots on stems. It may spread and cause leaves of young shoots to die and fall off. New strains of asparagus are available that resist rust. In other varieties, rust can be controlled with maneb fungicide spray applied after the harvest season.

Asparagus beetle—Beetles ($\frac{1}{4}$ inch long) have a red thorax and blue wing covers with yellow spots. Larvae and adults eat stems and leaves. Conspicuous dark eggs are laid on stems. Two to 4 generations per year.

Use rotenone, sevin, or malathion during the cutting season. Methoxychlor after cutting season. Usually a problem in spring on new stems.

Other problems—Several other insect and disease problems occasionally may attack asparagus plantings. Your local county agent can assist in diagnosing problems that develop and can recommend proper control measures.