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Growing Asparagus

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by Chantal Guillemin, UC Master Gardener

SUMMARY

Advance planning and some patience can reward the home gardener with asparagus for many years.

Site selection and preparation, cultivar selection, planting technique, disease control, and harvesting technique are all important considerations.

Crowns, whips and spears of asparagus...oh my!

Q: I am planning to grow asparagus this fall. How do I get started?

A: A long-lived (8 to 15 years), salt and drought-tolerant vegetable from the lily family, asparagus has been cultivated for millennia on seaside dunes along the Mediterranean and in the British Isles. California has several asparagus growing regions including Contra Costa County. Asparagus is adaptable, yet it has specific soil, planting, irrigation and harvest requirements.

Bed Preparation & Planting:

Full sun, sandy soil with a pH range of 6.0 to 7.5, good drainage, no weeds, temperatures ranging from 65° to 85° F, and space are prerequisites for successful home garden asparagus production. Proper bed preparation and build-up of organic matter in the soil begins at least a year prior to planting. Select an area that is relatively free of weeds and that drains well such as a hillside, and condition your soil by turning in peat moss, leaf mold, straw, animal and green manures.

Avoid soils with a high water table as this could lead to a short stand life due to unhealthy or diseased roots. October through March is the best time for planting transplants or crowns. After applying a little phosphate fertilizer in the trenches, plant one year old crowns with buds pointing upward in the bottom of a 6 to 8 inch deep furrow. Space crowns 12 inches apart, in rows 4 to 5 feet wide, and cover with 2 to 3 inches of soil. In six weeks, add another 3 inches. Continue to mound the soil over the plants as they develop to fill in and form a somewhat raised bed. To produce enough asparagus for fresh table use, plant ten crowns for each family member.

Cultivar Selection:

For an optimum disease-free start, select year-old field-grown crowns from a certified grower. In conjunction with the University of California, California Asparagus Seed and Transplants, Inc. in Davis has developed several hybrid cultivars which include UC 157 F1, Atlas F1, Apollo, Grande and Purple



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Passion. These varieties differ in spear diameter (measured at the widest point of the spear), tip tightness, yields and tolerance to fusarium root rot, rust and other fungal diseases.

Disease Control & Watering:

Proper sanitation is an important tool in controlling asparagus fungal diseases. For prevention, remove the debris of the previous year’s fern and destroy or compost it to kill the over-wintering pathogens. Wide row spacing may also help to improve air movement and drying of the fern. Do not plant a second crop of crowns in an old asparagus bed because levels of fusarium are already high in that location. Severity of the disease can be reduced by starting out with non-infected one-year old crowns grown in uncontaminated soil, and practicing good irrigation management. Asparagus requires frequent furrow irrigations in the spring and near the soil surface at harvest time. Water applications are cut back in late summer and early fall to curtail new fern growth before winter dormancy.

Harvesting & Post-Harvest Care:

The main harvest season is in spring but some spears may be cut in September and October. Do not harvest asparagus the first growing season. Harvesting too early and too many results in weakened plants and small spears. The asparagus

plant needs to grow and establish a healthy crown, requiring all its energy at first.

The third year after transplanting, asparagus can be harvested for two weeks. A full cutting season (60 to 75 days) may begin the fourth year after planting. Harvest whenever the spears reach 8 to 10 inches, which, in warm weather, could be every day. Cut at ground level or snap the spears, taking care not to damage the emerging ones. When the harvest season is finished, allow spears to mature into energy-producing ferns (foliage). Do not prune or cut back the ferns as doing this could jeopardize the yield and quality of next season’s growth.

Immediate post-harvest care such as washing and cooling can slow fibrous development and the loss of natural sugar, flavor and Vitamin C in asparagus spears. Whips, the small diameter spears, are usually tougher than the wide diameter spears. This is because the tough fibers are in the skin.

For More Information:

With planning, preparation and patience, home gardeners can grow and enjoy asparagus for many years. For more info on growing asparagus, consult UC publication 7234, available online at: <https://anrcatalog.ucanr.edu/pdf/7234.pdf>