Horticulture Information Leaflet 8002

NC STATE UNIVERSITY

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HOME GARDEN ASPARAGUS PRODUCTION

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Asparagus has been considered a spring-gardendelicacy since Romantimes. Any home gardener can grow and enjoy this vegetable. Asparagus is a perennial. If you plant and manage it properly, it will produce for 15 years or more. Because this crop will occupy the land for many years, you should start the asparagus bed properly: location, soil type, soil fertility, size and age of crowns and correct planting are important.

Varieties — Mary Washington (a rust-resistant variety) is a standard variety for most home gardeners. The all-male hybrids Jersey Gem (cercosporaleaf-spottolerant) and Jersey Knight produce significantly more yield. They produce no seed; thus, no seedling asparagus, which is considered weedy, will be produced. Jersey Gem and Jersey Knight can be purchased only from Walker Asparagus Farms in Vineland, NJ. Atlas is a very large-diameter spear and is available from California Asparagus Transplants and Seed in Davis, CA.

How Much to Plant — To produce enough asparagus for fresh table use, plant 10 crowns for each family member. If you are especially fond of asparagus or want a surplus to can or freeze, plant at least 25 plants for each family member. If you use the new hybrids reduce the number of plants by half.

Soil and Soil Preparation — Any well-drained soil will produce good asparagus. Use deep, fertile, sandy loam or loamy soil. If your

soil is clay, you should condition it with peat moss, leaf mold, or straw so spears will emerge straight. Using a raised bed is especially helpful with heavy soils. Have a soil test made at least 6 months before planting. Take soil samples 12 inches deep. The soil pH should be 6.0 to 6.7 because asparagus grows poorly in acid soils. Choose a site relatively free of perennial broadleaf weeds and nutgrass.

Start building up the organic matter (humus) content of the soil at least a year in advance of planting. This can be done by turning under green manure crops, animal manure, straw, peat moss, or leaf mold. Till the soil deeply several times before planting so that it will be in fine tilth at the time of planting. Use commercial fertilizer in addition to manures. Follow soil test suggestions. On average soils that have not been tested, broadcast 3 to 5 lb of 5-10-10 per 100 ft² of bed.

Planting — Crowns (roots) should be planted in rows 5 ft apart with the crowns spaced 12 inches apart in the row. The distance between rows can be reduced, but this may shorten the life of the bed. Closer inrow spacing will increase yield. Use large, well-rooted, one-year-old, disease-free crowns, purchased from a reliable source. To grow your own crowns, drill seed in the spring ½ inch deep and 2 inches apart in rows 2 to 3 ft apart. Germination is hastened by soaking seed in water for 5 to 6 days before planting. Dig and transplant

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the crowns the following spring. One oz of seed produces about 700 crowns.

In eastern North Carolina, plant the crowns in February. In the Piedmont and Mountains, plant in late winter, after the danger of hard freezes is over, but before plant growth starts. Plant the crowns in a furrow 8 inches deep. Make the furrow wide enough to accommodate the root system of the crowns when fully spread out. In placing the crowns in the furrow or trench, be sure to have the buds pointing upward. Cover the crowns with 2 inches of soil. As the plants grow, pull soil around the plants gradually until the trench is filled.

Annual Care of the Bed — Cultivate when necessary to control grass and weeds to insure a good crop of large spears. During the harvest period, asparagus can withstand shallow cultivation. Most weed management can be achieved chemically. Check the 1999 North Carolina Commercial Vegetable Recommendations (AG-586) for current recommendations or contact your county Cooperative Extension agent.

Each spring, just before the spears start to grow, broadcast a complete fertilizer such as 5-10-10 on the bed at the rate of 2 to 5 lb per 100 ft². This should be done about March 1 for the east and 2 weeks later for the rest of the state. Give the bed a second application of fertilizer at the end of the cutting season.

Allow the plants to grow in the fall until they have turned brown. Then cut down the fern and destroy it. If cut down before frost, the next year's crop of spears is reduced. **Harvesting** — Do not harvest asparagus the first growing season after planting crowns. It can be harvested (cut) for a short time (not to exceed two weeks) the second year. Weak plants and small spears result from harvesting too much, too early. After the second year after planting crowns, harvest asparagus from 6 to 8 weeks each year. Weak plants should be harvested for less time.

Exercise care in cutting the spears to prevent damage to those spears that have not yet emerged. Cut or snap the spears at ground level. This practice eliminates the possibility of damaging other spears.

Preparation for Use—Asparagus loses edible qualities rapidly after harvest. Fiber develops rapidly after harvest. To maintain asparagus quality, wash and cool asparagus soon after harvest. If the asparagus wilts, it can be made turgid by soaking in cool water.

Table 1: Typical schedule for establishing asparagus from seed.

Time		
of Year	Year	Activity
Spring	1	Plant seed for crowns.
Spring	2	Dig crowns and plant in permanent site.
Spring	3	Harvest lightly (2 to 3 weeks).
Spring	4 to 15	Harvest 6 to 8 weeks each spring.