

ASPARAGUS
by Irving Garbutt

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May 25, 2011

Tender spears of asparagus shot up in the garden in late April. We but off the shoots immediately, knowing a sharp freeze could ruin this first crop. Brrr. Next morning the mercury dropped to 19 and the shoots would have shriveled. More will come as the weather warms in May.

This hardy, tender perennial thrives so well in our somewhat alkaline soils it's a wonder more gardeners don't grow a dozen plants, which would suffice for a family of four. It even grows in the wild, along the river banks and ditch banks, and in woody river bottoms.

It's fun to go asparagus hunting in the spring. You look for the old dead canes from last year and poke around the leaf mold by old tree stumps or willows to locate the tender young shoots. Better hurry, though, those shoots grow so fast they fern out and become woody in just a few days.

Most people probably don't grow asparagus because they're too impatient. It takes three or four years if you start from seed, to get a crop worth picking. But if you buy two-year-old plants, which are reasonable, you can hurry the process.

Just be sure to prepare the soil deeply. Dig a trench and fill it with well rotted manure and compost, then spread the roots out and water well. The rewards are great, if you compare the cost of home grown asparagus with small canes costing \$1.00 or more at the supermarket. It's

easy to freeze also, in ziplock bags.

During the hot summer months, let the asparagus ferns grow. They furnish an attractive backdrop for the garden or flower bed and also the branches can enhance a flower arrangement. The asparagus canes need to grow to replenish the roots and crowns for next year's crop. If you want extra prolific asparagus, buy only male plants. The females put too much strength into those little red berries. (We don't know how to tell the sex of asparagus, but some nurseries can provide males only at fancy prices.)

Unfortunately the asparagus harvest is all too short. For most of us, it's just a spring delicacy. But there are ways to prolong the season and get big, thick spears all summer long. You would have to plant two asparagus beds, one for spring and one for fall, up to frost. Heavy mulch is recommended.

Some horticulturists say deep planting is not necessary for best results, since asparagus roots tend to spread out horizontally. In this climate, with late freezes, a trench can be dug 12 inches deep, with a two-inch mound at the bottom, over which the roots are spread. The shoots will emerge later than shallow plantings and thus avoid spring freezes.

If all this sounds like too much work, you can always watch the stores for asparagus sales later in the spring and load up at \$.50 or \$.60 a pound, then can or freeze for months ahead. But you won't find the store bough nearly as tender as your own shoots.

Spears deteriorate rapidly after cutting. High temperatures reduce sugar content and cause toughness. The spears should be used shortly after harvest, or refrigerated. Control of weeds and grass is also a continuing problem. Consult the county agent for recommended herbicides.

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