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Growing Asparagus

The asparagus plant is made up of the top (spears turning into ferns), crown (buds) and roots.

All three are vital to a productive plant. The ferns are the “factory,” which, through the process of photosynthesis, produces food stored in the crown and roots below ground. The number of vigorous spears in the spring depends upon the amount of food produced and stored in the crown during the preceding summer. Producing a good crop of ferns is necessary to ensure a good crop of spears the next spring. Do not cut back the old ferns until the end of the season when they are completely dead. In the fall, nutrients move from the ferns to the crown. Removing the ferns too early weakens the crown and may reduce the size of the spears the following spring.

Can asparagus grow in containers? The answer is yes. You *can* grow asparagus in a large deep pot. Maybe you don’t have enough space in your garden, or maybe you live in an apartment - whatever the reason, growing asparagus in pots or containers is easy. Just follow the steps outlined above.

Asparagus is dioecious. Dioecious plants produce separate male and female plants. Male asparagus plants live longer and are more productive than female plants. Excellent all-male asparagus varieties for the home garden include ‘Jersey Giant,’ ‘Jersey Knight,’ ‘Jersey King,’ and ‘Jersey Supreme.’ ‘Jersey Knight’ is one that does well in heavier soils. ‘Purple Passion’ bears dusky, plum-colored stalks. They usually turn green when cooked.

What’s great about asparagus is that it’s a hardy perennial that will keep on producing for up to 10 years. So once planted and well taken care of, your asparagus plant can keep on giving year after year.

Do you have a gardening question? Please email, call, or visit the Douglas County Master Gardener Plant Clinic at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu, 541-672-4461, or 1134 S.E. Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.

Question: What can you tell me about growing asparagus in my home garden? What is the origin of this delicious vegetable?

Answer: Homegrown asparagus is one of the earliest vegetables of the spring. Formerly of the lily family, asparagus is now in a family all its own called Asparagaceae. Known botanically as *Asparagus officinalis*, it is native to the seacoasts of Europe, North Africa and Asia. It was cultivated in gardens in ancient Rome as far back as the first century AD.

Asparagus is an exceptional vegetable choice for the home garden because it’s healthy, extremely versatile, and simple to grow. Nutritionally, asparagus is low in calories and sodium, high in folate and a significant source of vitamins C and B6, potassium and thiamin.

Careful attention must be given to your site selection because asparagus will occupy the spot for 10 years or longer. Asparagus needs eight hours of sun per day. Since asparagus is a long-lived perennial, do not plant it where trees or tall shrubs might eventually shade the plants or compete for nutrients and water. Select a site that is well drained and fertile. The pH should be around six or seven. A general recommendation is to add a well balanced fertilizer before planting.

Although asparagus can be established by direct seeding or transplanting of greenhouse grown seedlings, most home gardeners prefer planting field grown 1-year-old crowns. March and April are the recommended months for planting asparagus crowns. Dig holes or trenches about 8 inches deep and 10 inches wide. Spread the crown roots in the bottom of the hole or trench and cover with a two-inch layer of sifted compost. Even though the young crown will appear to be a lifeless mass of stringy roots, it will begin to send up small green shoots



PIXABAY PHOTOS

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(spears) shortly after planting. During the summer of the first year as your asparagus grows, the trench should be slowly filled with a mixture of fine topsoil and compost. It is advisable not to do the filling too rapidly or the growing plants may be stifled. The tops of the crowns should be 6 inches below the soil surface when the trenches are

completely filled. This allows for cultivation and also provides a sufficient depth of soil for new buds to develop on the top of the crowns. Keep your plants well-watered. To manage annual weeds, mulch with straw, grass clippings, chopped leaves or conifer needles after the trenches have been filled in.

Harvest your asparagus two

or three years after planting the crown. Cut off spears at the ground level with a sharp knife. Only harvest the spears once in year two. After giving your asparagus time to establish, you can harvest the spears in the following years from early spring when the spears reach about 8 inches long for about eight to 10 weeks.



Asparagus ferns.