Asparagus Growing Instructions

Asparagus is a long lived perennial when planted and cared for properly. A member of the lily family, it is native to Western Europe where it is found growing on the shorelines and river banks and on the steppes of Russia. Both the Greeks and Romans enjoyed asparagus and added it to their cultivated gardens. The early American colonists enjoyed this succulent vegetable as well. Since Asparagus is long lived carefully consider where you plant the roots. Asparagus prefers to grow in rich, well drained, sandy soils but it can be grown in clay soil with some amendments added well in advance of planting. Grows best with 8 hours or more of full sun but can survive with 4 to 8 hours of sun per day.

Clay Soil: Amend the soil in fall so the amendments have ample time to decompose, improving the drainage and soil fertility. Dig the asparagus bed or row to a depth of 2 feet. To encourage drainage put stones, broken bricks, broken terra cotta or use plastic tile pipe at the bottom of the bed or row. Next add manure, rotted leaves, compost or peat moss in the bottom of the row. Then prepare the soil that was dug from the area by incorporating organic matter or compost and at least 4 ounces or more of bone meal per square yard of soil.

If you have acid soil such as found in Western Washington and Oregon, add 1 pound of lime every ten feet of planting area. If you use Bone Meal you will not have to add lime, since Bone Meal works like lime and contains phosphorous as well. But if you use just lime, then apply phosphorous, a 0-20-0 or 0-40-0, liberally in the bottom of the planting trench. If time is short use organic matter that is thoroughly decomposed otherwise you may cause the soft, starchy asparagus roots to rot once planted.

Sandy Loam Soil: If you have sandy loam, well drained soil the bed preparation is much easier. Simply add lime and phosphorous (0-20-0 or 0-40-0) at a rate of 4 lbs. per 100 square feet or bone meal at the rate of 4 ounces per square yard and spade into the soil.

Planting: Plant in Spring from February through early April. Soak the roots for 24 hours prior to planting. Dig trenches 12 inches wide, 8” deep and at least 18” apart. Form a ridge of soil in the center of the planting trench and perch the crowns on this ridge, spreading the roots down over the ridge. Cover with 2 inches of soil. Space plants 15” to 18” apart so the roots do not touch each other. As the asparagus tips grow during the summer, fill trenches in gradually to maintain 2” of soil over the top of the crowns.

Asparagus grows with minimal water, too much can cause the roots to rot out. The new asparagus crowns grow on top of last year’s crowns so the crowns have a tendency to rise as they mature. In fall the asparagus bed should have 3 to 5 inches of soil over the crowns. If the crowns are too shallow the spears are spindly and if planted too deep the crowns grow to the surface too rapidly sacrificing the yield of your early crop.

Harvest: Be patient and do not harvest the first year but do leave a few fronds growing for photosynthesis. In the second season you can harvest for two to three weeks until the spears develop ferny stalks. This encourages the roots to store food for the next year’s growth. Leave some fronds on the plant until fall when they will brown out. At that time you will cut them off and clean the asparagus bed. In the third year and thereafter, harvest can last 8 to 12 weeks. Harvest by snapping the spears off at or near ground level. If the spears bend but do not snap off, cut with a sharp knife. These spears will be tough so our grower recommends peeling the outer layer or epidermis off the tough portion of the spear before cooking.

Maintenance: Once asparagus is established it is fairly easy to maintain. It is extremely deep rooted so water and additional nutrients are not as crucial as with other vegetables. You can grow asparagus with minimal irrigation and fertilization. Fertilize after harvest in the spring when the plants begin to fern out. Aged manure is excellent or use a complete fertilizer such as 5-10-10 at the rate of 8 to 10 pounds per 100 feet. Supplemental watering should be done during the fern season but not during harvest time. In fall when the fern growth browns cut off all the fern growth and dispose of them. Keeping the asparagus bed clean will prevent disease and discourage insects as well. In fall be sure the roots or new crowns are covered with 3 to 5 inches of soil.

Insects: The asparagus beetle, spotted asparagus beetle and bean beetle can cause damage. The adult asparagus beetle is metallic blue-black with orange-yellow markings, 0.25 inches long and feeds on the spears. The spotted asparagus beetle is brick red with black spots. These beetles feed on both spears and ferns and the larvae feeds on the berries. The bean beetle looks like a lady bug but is yellow with black spots. Damage from this beetle begins in May. Use an Insecticidal Soap or other organic insecticide that is effective against beetles.