

How to grow asparagus

Asparagus (*Asparagus officinalis*)

Family: Liliaceae
 Hardiness: Hardy
 Ease of growing: Difficult
 Nutrient needs: Moderate
 Water needs: Low
 Common propagation: Crowns (one-year-old nursery grown)

Transplants

Weeks to grow transplant: 10 to 12
 Start: February
 Plant out: May

Planning facts

Typical spacing: 12" to 18" in 4' to 5' rows
 Depth: 10" to 14" trench
 Plants per square foot: 0.25
 Time to first harvest: 2 to 3 years

Variety selection

In Michigan, the most commonly grown varieties are Millenium and Jersey varieties (e.g. Jersey Giant; Jersey Knight). Millenium is a newer variety from Canada that is well adapted to Michigan's climate. It does well on heavier soils, but is somewhat more susceptible to foliar diseases than the Jersey varieties.

Preparation and planting

Asparagus is a perennial crop that can be expected to produce for 10 years or more, so it is particularly important to take the time to find a suitable site, and prepare it carefully. Sandy, well-drained soils with pH between 6.8 and 7.5 are preferred. Relatively high levels of phosphorous

should be provided (up to 200 lbs P/A) and incorporated before planting. Perennial weeds, such as quackgrass, should be eliminated before planting. Plant asparagus crowns in a trench 10 to 14 inches deep. After planting, cover the crowns with 2 inches of soil.

Care

As new shoots grow, fill in the soil around them, but don't cover the tips of the shoots. Do not harvest the first year after planting and only harvest sparingly in the second year. Add N and K sources (about 50 lbs N/A) after harvest in subsequent years. Asparagus has relatively low water requirements, and generally doesn't need irrigation in Michigan on most garden soils. However, on very sandy soils, irrigation is helpful during fern growth.

Major pests

Insects: Asparagus beetle, Asparagus miner.
Diseases: Rust, Fusarium, Phytophthora, purple spot.

Harvesting and storage

You will get the first large harvest in the third and fourth years. The season begins in May and can continue through June. A 25-foot row should yield 7 to 12 pounds of asparagus. Snap off 8- to 10-inch spears that are less than 1 inch in diameter before the buds open. Leave those that are smaller than a pencil. Complete the harvest before July 1. The ferns that grow following harvest should not be cut until they are completely dead in the fall or just before growth begins in spring. Store asparagus under cool and moist conditions, such as the crisper of your refrigerator.

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