

# Asparagus growing is a family business

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One of the first vegetables harvested from the garden in early Spring is asparagus. Warm days push the green spears through the ground's crust. Many a homemaker is glad for the first fresh produce to put on the dinner table. To Ruth Wolfe though, asparagus means lots of hard work. She and her family raise asparagus for local marketing. They have over four thousand plants to tend and harvest.

The main work force at their home is Ruth, who collects the daily pickings with the help of her older son Kenny, and her husband Kenneth who does the tractor work and some of the hand work as well. The Wolfes live on a seven acre site touching the Lake Aldred Recreation Park at Holtwood R2, Lancaster County.

Although Mr. Wolfe works fulltime at Armstrong, the assortment of trees and garden crops planted on their property keeps the family very busy past the regular work week hours. When the family moved there 10 years ago there were a number of Chestnut trees already established so Kenneth decided to take a course from the Penn State Extension to learn how to care for nut trees. That course led to several more including fruit trees, strawberries and asparagus.

Over the past several years their farming enterprise increased to include 50 fruit trees—apples, peaches, pears, plums, apricots, cherries, 45 blueberry bushes, 10 chestnut trees which produce 1000 pounds of nuts a year, black raspberries, 3000 strawberry plants, seasonal garden produce such as cauliflower and sweet corn and finally, the asparagus crop which covers half an acre.

After studying a course from the Extension service, Kenneth ventured into the asparagus by a series of three plantings, one new planting each Spring for three Springs to bring the total to over four thousand plants. "In 1975, early in April, we planted 1000 crowns. In 1976 we added 2000 plants and in 1977 we planted 1100 more," he explained as he consulted his notebook.

"The Penn State information says to plant 18 inches apart as a guide. Actually, I placed the roots in the furrow spread out from the crown so that the tips of the roots touched from one plant to the next," he added. "One particular order of roots was very nice and large so the plants that year were not as close as other plantings," he explained.

The Wolfes ordered two-year old roots from a Maryland firm. These roots were then placed in a furrow made by a shovel harrow pulled by a small tractor to a depth of 10 to 12 inches. The roots were placed directly on the floor of the furrow then covered over by raking in the soil by hand. "We do everything the hard way, I think," Ruth Wolfe added. "We have a small operation and much of the work is handwork."

Mrs. Wolfe explained that their soil is very stoney and loose so they could get away with filling in the furrow

Kenneth Wolfe, seen on the tractor with the herbicide sprayer attached, uses Sevin to control the asparagus beetle.



completely the first year while directions suggest partial filling in, during consecutive growing seasons. "I'm not sure that what we do is exactly right, but it has worked for us so far," she added.

Heavy soil might smother the new plantings so partial filling in of the deep furrow is recommended generally, she explained.

During the first growing season the new plantings are in the ground, they must be kept free of weeds by pulling by

finger in diameter for a few weeks." The rest should be left to grow into the seed bearing bushes.

The third year after planting, four weeks of cutting is recommended. After that, the asparagus should be established sufficiently to allow a long cutting season from mid Spring through to early July, depending on rain and temperature.

The Wolfes break off their asparagus at ground level or just below ground level every day and sometimes during the hotter weather twice a day to insure their customers of nothing but the tenderest spears. "There is no waste with our asparagus. We just could not feel right selling it that way," Mrs. Wolfe added.

Mrs. Wolfe is kept busy in the Spring taking orders by phone and gathering the asparagus each day. With their thirteen year old son's help she keeps up with the picking.

Kenneth and Ruth also have two other children, Joyce who is 10 years old and Jeff who is eight. All three children attend the Lancaster Christian School and when not at school are learning to care for the plants and produce on their property.

It is up to Kenneth to spray the herbicides, till the ground, spread the horse manure, commercial fertilizers and lime and to control the pests such as the asparagus beetle.

Even with the first early cutting just completed, there is already evidence of the ongoing battle against the beetle, Kenneth pointed out. On one stalk he showed a series of asparagus beetle eggs which appear to be tiny, black, short hairs protruding from the stalk. Shortly, the eggs would hatch into little worms which suck out the nutrients in the stalks, leaving them eaten out and brown.

Wolfe uses Sevin on the patch after picking is completed to control the beetle. He has to continue spraying regularly until cold weather comes in the Fall.

A County Extension agent advised Wolfe to spray with Princep after cutting is completed to help control Summer weed growth. Keeping the patch cut-off, or, broken off in the Wolfe's case, also helps to keep pests and weeds under control. Cutting off the spears below ground level is advised because this practice is supposed to hinder disease from entering the crown of the plants.

Getting rid of the asparagus itself is much easier than getting rid of weeds and bugs, Mrs. Wolfe added. "Most of our orders are for 20 or 30 pounds at a time for those who want to freeze it or for a bunch, or one pound, for a meal or two at a time." "We have orders taken way ahead. Our customers know they can't wait too long to place their order or they may not get it," she added.

"The work is not as bad now as it was the first few years when we had the new plantings because we had the weeds to pull by hand then," she lamented. "Now the spraying really helps out a lot," she concluded.

When Ruth serves asparagus to her family she usually fixes it with cheese because it is their favorite. "I take very little water and cook the asparagus pieces for only a very short time, just until they become tender." "Then I add pieces of velveta cheese and put a lid on the pan until the cheese melts." "I think you can over cook asparagus and cook it with too much water," she cautioned.

She also explained that she blanches her asparagus for the freezer only long enough to heat it through and it turns a bright color. Then she cools it quickly in cold water and seals it in double plastic bags for Winter meals. "It is something we always think tastes good in the Winter time," she said.

One would think that having so much would make one tired of asparagus, but to the Wolfes, it is a garden crop which gets easier to care for and market each year.

Kenneth Wolfe suggests that any gardener interested in establishing his own asparagus plants check with Extension agents in a given area for details and advice. Plants need plenty of sun, a good bit of rain and warmth to grow asparagus, he said. Customers are easy to find if the quality is right, both Ruth and Kenneth agreed.

## Homestead Notes

hand and shoots should not be cut. Taking the growth the first year would weaken the growing crowns under the soil level.

At the beginning of the second Spring, or first Spring after planting, fertilizer can be top-dressed on the rows and the old plants which are now dead above the ground can be harrowed down to make a clean surface. Wolfe sprays with a herbicide at this time to discourage weeds as well.

During the second season of growth, Wolfe explained you can cut the asparagus "that is as large as your middle

The younger children, Joyce and Jeff, learn how to select and break off the asparagus, with Ruth guiding their efforts.



The asparagus spears that are tender to ground level are ready to be picked by Mrs. Ruth Wolfe.