

Asparagus, a vegetable worth cutting

BY SALLY BAIR
Staff Correspondent

Many delights come with the arrival of Spring and the onset of gardening but asparagus has to rank as one of the richest pleasures of the season. Nothing can quite compare with fresh-from-the-garden asparagus, cooked to perfection and covered with melted butter.

Unless you grow your own, you probably have little idea of the hard work involved in getting that garden fresh delight to your table. Mr. and Mrs. Vance Bricker, Carlisle R1, devote their entire spring to providing asparagus for enthusiasts.

Asparagus is one of the earliest vegetables to creep through the soil and Alice Bricker says you can begin cutting as early as the first week of April, depending upon the weather. Her first day for cutting this year was April 6, although last year cool weather postponed the first harvest until the third week of the month.

Once the first cutting begins, asparagus harvest is an every day including Sunday job. The Brickers are cutting off of 10,000 plants, with an additional 5,000 in the process of maturing.

There are three regular cutters including Alice, husband Vance and their good friend Edna Brehm. During the season their day begins at 5.45 a.m. when they "go through the whole patch." While the total amount of time varies throughout the season and depends upon the weather, Alice estimates that it takes about three hours daily. Cutting stops from 7:00 a.m. to 8:00 a.m. while Edna and Alice each go home to get their school age children off to school. Usually it continues until 10:30 a.m.

The cutters go through the rows, two at a time, using a sharp cutting tool to cut the plants at ground surface. Of course, this means a lot of bending. Alice says, "You need a strong back." On a good day they might cut 200 pounds of asparagus.

When the cutting is finished, the work is just beginning. Next Edna and Alice work to "bunch" the asparagus in small parcels of approximately 3/4 pound each.

This is an estimate, and the bunches are weighed when they are picked up by customers. Each bunch is secured by a string, then stood in trays with metal mesh bottoms. After being hosed down to wash off excess soil, the bunches are stood upright in trays of water until customers arrive.

The only waste in the operation is cutting off the ragged ends before they are sold. While these are usable, the Brickers discard them. But Alice adds, "At the bottom of the spear, you can peel off the hard part and then it is soft enough to use."

As they sort out the asparagus for bundles, there are skunny, fat and otherwise malformed asparagus spears left on the table. These are then cut up and offered for sale as is, or used by Alice and Edna, both of whom claim they never tire of eating.

The two women work easily together, with animated chatter making the work load seem lighter. Alice says Edna is the sister she never had. When customer arrives for an order there is pleasant conversation as the work continues.

All asparagus is sold by order, with customers calling two weeks in advance to place their orders. They are then notified on the specific day theirs is ready.

Alice says, "There is none sold wholesale. We never have any sitting around." Indeed a drop-in customer cannot expect to acquire even a bunch of asparagus except by luck.

Alice tries to have all the asparagus picked up by noon, then it is "good and fresh." It also frees up her afternoon for hoeing strawberries, her other intensive business in early summer.

Customers come from as far away as Annville in Lebanon County and Maryland. Alice states, "Some customers repeat but each year I get some new ones."

She feels there is an unlimited market for asparagus and admits that she could sell far more than she has. However, she says she has no desire to expand, preferring to keep the operation a size that she



Vance and Alice Bricker pose by the sign which identifies their asparagus crop is hers. They work together on these spring crops with a schedule which leaves little free time. Alice says the strawberries are her husband's and the

and her husband can handle with just a little extra help. She says there is no local competition in the asparagus business.

Both Alice and Edna agree that the most important thing in cooking asparagus is not to overcook. While Alice contends it is not necessary to blanch the asparagus before freezing, she tells those who do they should put the asparagus in boiling water just until it turns a different shade of green, about one minute. Then it should be plunged into ice water, drained and frozen.

Alice prefers her asparagus in a casserole. She puts one layer of partially cooked asparagus into a greased casserole, adds a layer of hard cooked eggs, then spreads some cheese soup and repeats each layer. This is topped with bread crumbs and baked at 350 degrees for about 1/2 hour.

Edna says she prefers her asparagus simply cooked and served with butter.

Alice says she tries to find time to freeze about 40 packs a year for her own use, but adds, "I get the little stuff chopped up."

This year there was a frost which

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Edna Brehm weighs a bunch of asparagus before it is sold. All the asparagus is ordered in advance, with customers notified when their order is ready.



The cutting tool employed by the Brickers works easily to cut off the asparagus spear as a first step in the marketing process.



Alice and Edna show the technique for cutting asparagus in the field. Alice says, "It takes a strong back." Cutters take two rows