

Seeding,
Weeding
and mulch
more

For the avid gardener

Asparagus

Do you relish fresh asparagus in spring but can never afford all you'd like to serve your family? Why not beat the high prices of store-bought asparagus by growing your own? It's easier than you think, and a planting, once established, provides tasty spears every spring for as long as 20 years.

The fastest way to get asparagus into production, according to Ted Torrey, Burpee vegetable research manager and home gardener, is by planting healthy, one-year-old roots. Sometimes you can make a light cutting the second year after roots are set out, more the third year, and an ample harvest from then on. (This is about two years faster than planting asparagus from seed.)

Mary Washington is a time-tested asparagus variety that produces thick, straight, dark green spears tinged slightly purple at the tips. The flavor is delicious and the yield heavy and dependable. Plants are resistant to asparagus rust.

In recent years, hybrid varieties of asparagus have been introduced, and Brocks Imperial is outstanding. The extra-strong plants start producing shoots earlier in spring than other varieties and also keep on longer

into early summer. Spears are extremely thick and heavy, yet stay tender and tasty. They are an eye-appealing medium green with less purple tinge than Mary Washington.

Asparagus will be producing in your garden for a generation or more. The best place to plant it is in a sunny bed at the north or west side of your vegetable garden, where it won't be disturbed or shade other vegetables. The feathery, fern-like foliage that follows the harvest season grows 4 to 6 feet high and makes an attractive background or can screen an unsightly view.

If you don't have a vegetable garden, you can still enjoy home-grown asparagus. Plant it along a fence. You'll be picking succulent spears in spring, and later the attractive green tops will soften the severity of the fence. You can also plant a row of asparagus at the rear of a sunny flower border, but you'll need to leave a little access room to reach and pick the shoots in spring. After the harvest period, the tall foliage will enhance the beauty of the flowers growing in front of it.

Whatever the location, you need to prepare the soil well for your long-term asparagus crop. Its success over the years depends a great deal on initial soil conditions

and fertility. First of all, soil drainage must be good. Asparagus cannot stand "wet feet" very long after a heavy rain. Try to choose a place without this problem, or correct it by incorporating sand or cinders in early spring, as soon as the ground is workable. Next, dig the soil to a depth of 8 inches or more and remove stones. Work in generous amounts of compost, peat moss or well-rotted manure; also add a balanced vegetable fertilizer according to soil test recommendations or manufacturer's directions. At the same time, add ground limestone if your soil tests lower than pH 6.0 on the acidity-alkalinity scale. Asparagus thrives in neutral to slightly acid soil.

Now you're ready to plant asparagus roots. Allow about a dozen for each member of your

Spread out the roots, octopus fashion, as far as they will go. Cover them with 3 to 4 inches of fine soil. Fill in the trenches gradually, as the shoots grow. Water deeply if the soil is very dry.

It's very important to control weeds during the growing season, especially the first few years when the asparagus planting is getting established. A pre-emergence weed killer can be used in early spring; check with your local county agricultural Agent for latest recommendations.

For the rest of the season, cultivate the asparagus bed shallowly and often to remove weeds while they're small. Be careful not to damage the spreading asparagus roots or emerging shoots. A better and easier method of weed control is to

midsummer, apply a balanced garden fertilizer to the asparagus planting. Water deeply during long dry spells. In late fall, when the tops of the plants have turned brown, cut them off at ground level and add them to your compost pile. In areas with severe winters, mulch the asparagus planting with well-rotted manure, hay peat moss or compost after the ground has frozen.

Do not cut any asparagus the first season the roots are set out and none the second, unless the shoots are at least 1/2 inch in diameter. If they are this thick, then you can pick and savor asparagus from your garden a few times, but don't overdo it. The plants still need to make as much top growth as possible to become fully productive for the rest of their long life. The third year, you can expect to harvest asparagus for about 4 weeks. After that, the asparagus season will last for about 6-8 weeks, from midspring until diminishing spear diameter indicates it's time to stop picking and let the top growth develop.

Spears should be 7 to 10 inches long at harvest time and you can either cut or snap them off at ground level. Use them as soon as possible after picking or store them for a short time in plastic bags in your refrigerator. To serve, steam spears until tender and drizzle with melted butter or hollandaise sauce. Use leftovers in soup, casseroles or cold in salads. Also remember to freeze excess asparagus. It will taste extra good "fresh" next winter.



family to have enough asparagus during the harvest season to serve a couple of times a week, with some overage for guests or to freeze.

Space rows 2 1/2 to 4 feet apart. Dig trenches 6 to 8 inches deep and 12 to 15 inches wide. Set the roots in the bottom of the trench, with the crowns (centers of the roots) facing up and 15 to 18 inches apart.

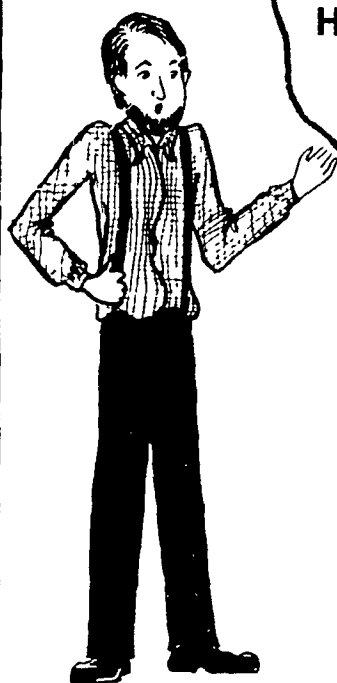
use a mulch (covering over the ground) of straw, salt hay, wood chips or some other organic material; the mulch must be loose enough to allow asparagus shoots to emerge, yet will smother or shade out sprouting weeds. These materials also benefit growth by adding humus to the soil as they decompose.

Early every spring, and again in



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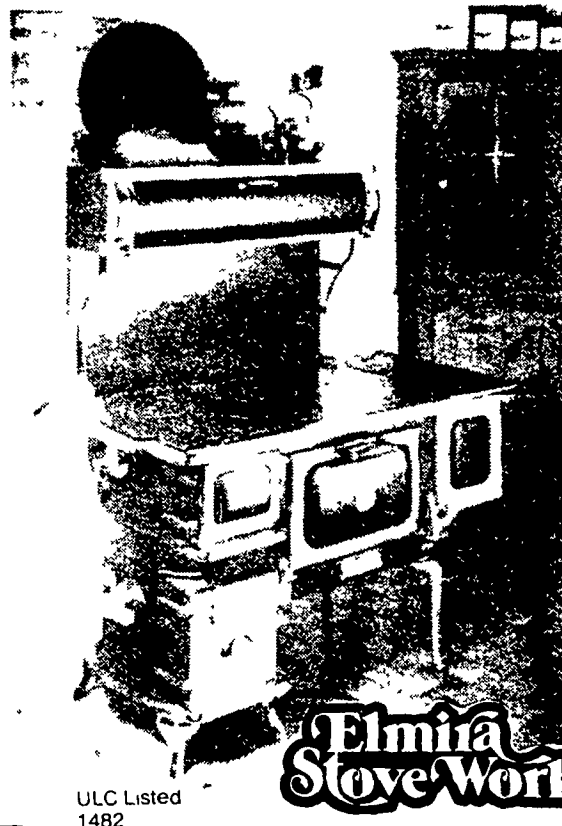
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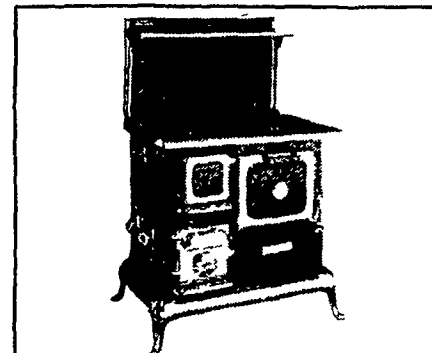
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