

Home on the Range

Asparagus Grows In Popularity

One of the special treats of spring and a tantalizing glimpse at the summer ahead is the arrival of fresh asparagus at farm markets and roadside stands.

This popular member of the lily family is available from April through June and is grown on 248 acres of Pennsylvania farmland.

While today's asparagus is known for its delicate flavor, Greeks and Romans more than 2,000 years ago prized the plant for its medicinal qualities, believing it would relieve toothaches and prevent bee stings.

Modern medicine has since replaced the use of asparagus for treating minor health problems, but there's no denying the plants nutritional benefits. A one-cup serving provides two-thirds of the daily recommended allowance of vitamin C, one third of vitamin A, and 10 percent of the day's dose of iron, all with only 36 calories.

Plan to cook 1/2 pound (6 to 10 spears) per serving, depending on their size.

In selecting fresh asparagus, consumers should look for stalks that are straight, crisp, and tender with compact, pointed tips and no more than an inch of tough, woody base.

Here's an easy tip for choosing the most tender asparagus: When comparing plants of equal quality, always select the thickest stalks available. Large spears contain more meaty pulp between fibers, making the asparagus more tender after cooking.

For best results, asparagus

should be prepared immediately after purchase, as its delicate flavor deteriorates quickly at room temperature. If asparagus must be stored, place the stalks in the coldest part of the refrigerator wrapped at the base with a damp paper towel.

When asparagus is ready for cooking, break off the stalk as far down as it will snap easily. Wash thoroughly, and trim off the little nibs along the lower part of the spear.

Fresh asparagus can be steamed, boiled or prepared in the microwave, and is most often served with a garnish of drawn butter, bread crumbs or hollandaise sauce. Pieces of cut asparagus also make a welcome addition to cold salads.

Preparation

Wash asparagus in cool running water. If the tips have any sand on them, dunk them in and out of water, then rinse thoroughly. Cut or break off the tough white ends.

Whatever cooking method you choose, cook asparagus quickly; overdone asparagus will be unappetizingly limp and discolored and have a bitter taste. The spears should be firm-tender, so that you can pierce the butt end with the point of a paring knife.

Another test of doneness is to pick up a spear with kitchen tongs: If it bends over slightly, it's done. After cooking, lift out the spears with tongs or two spatulas and let drain for a minute on a paper towel. If you plan to serve the asparagus

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Featured Recipe

This is the season for freshly cut asparagus. But you may be interested in eating this tender vegetable for more than taste purposes.

Researchers have identified a compound called a "saponin" found in asparagus, which may prevent leukemia cells from multiplying. Read more about this in the above article.

Jersey Asparagus Farms, Inc. sent this recipe, which won top honors for Shirley DeLange of Michigan in a contest.

ASPARAGUS PUFF RING

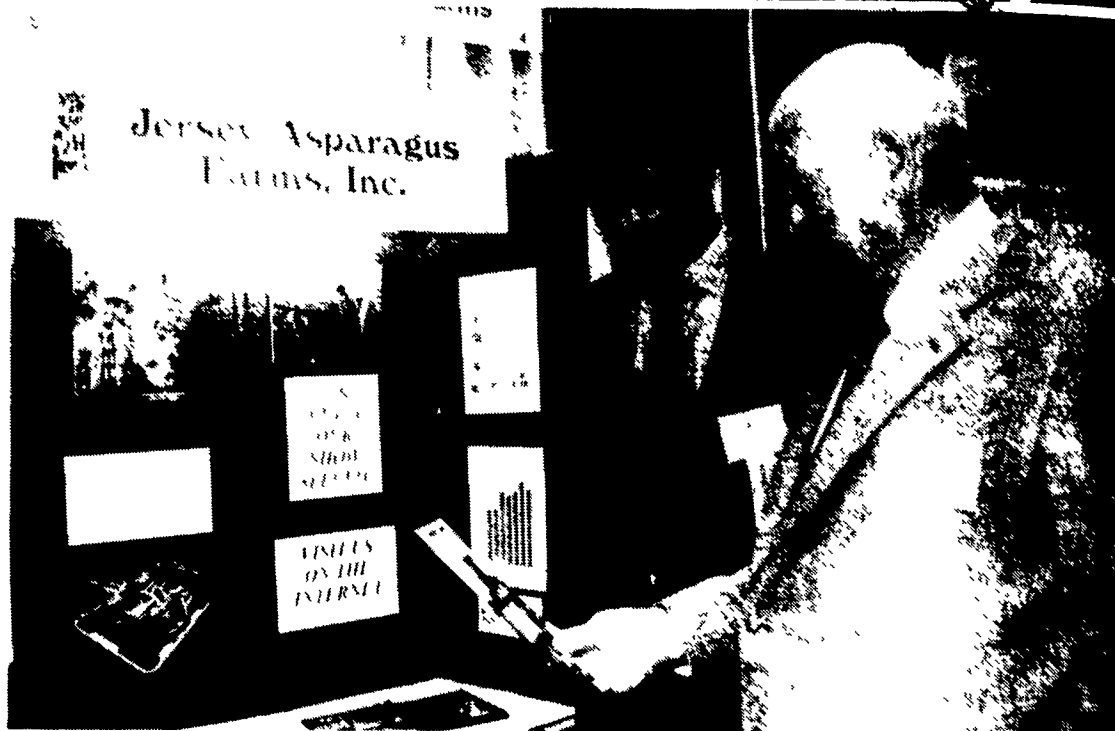
- 1/2 cup water
- 6 tablespoons butter
- 1/2 cup all-purpose flour
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 3 eggs
- 1/2 cup grated parmesan cheese, divided

Filling:

- 1 pound fresh asparagus, cut into 1-inch pieces
- 1/2 cup diced onion
- 2 tablespoons butter
- 2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon pepper
- 1 1/2 cups milk
- 1/2 cup shredded Swiss cheese
- 2 tablespoons grated parmesan cheese
- 2 cups diced fully cooked ham

In a saucepan over medium heat, bring water and butter to a boil. Add flour and salt all at once; stir until a smooth ball forms. Let stand for 5 minutes. Add eggs, one at a time, beating well after each, beat until smooth.

Stir in 3 tablespoons parmesan cheese. Using 1/4 cupfuls of dough, form a ring around the sides of a greased 10-inch quiche pan or pie plate (mounds should touch). Top with the remaining cheese. Bake at 400 degrees for 35 minutes. Meanwhile, cook asparagus until crisp-tender, 3-4 minutes; drain. In a saucepan, saute onion in butter until tender. Stir in flour, salt and pepper. Gradually add milk; bring to a boil over medium heat; stirring constantly. Reduce heat; stir in cheeses until melted. Stir in ham and asparagus; spoon into ring. Serve immediately. Yield: 6 servings.



Michael Walker, vice president, and his dad Sam Walker, president of Jersey Asparagus Farms, review information that Rutgers University researchers have identified a compound called a "saponin" found in asparagus that prevents leukemia cells from multiplying in laboratory cultures. Research has not yet been begun with humans and it will take years to confirm whether or not eating asparagus will counteract cancer cells in humans. Anticipating an increased demand for asparagus, Walker said that the firm is gearing up for the demand by harvesting more seed from existing varieties.

Asparagus Compound Appears To Fight Cancer Cells

Asparagus has long been touted as a nutritious vegetable, but recent research shows that it may be even better for you than your mother thought. It appears that asparagus may prevent leukemia cells from multiplying.

Recently researchers identified a compound called a "saponin" found in asparagus. The laboratory findings by scientists were experiments performed using laboratory cultures of HL-60 cell, not human subjects. This report was published in the July 1996 issue of "Cancer Letter," an academic journal. The variety used for the research was one of the varieties developed by Rutgers University Research and Development

Department. These varieties are identified as Jersey Male Hybrids.

Leukemia is a form of cancer that affects bone marrow and lymph systems by overproducing blood and lymph cell. The asparagus saponin suppresses the growth of leukemia HL-60 cells by stopping DNA synthesis, without affecting normal cells. By introducing the asparagus saponin to affected tissue, the cancer cell count dropped substantially.

Dr. Stephen Garrison, one of the researchers, said there have been repeated and confirmed studies not only with leukemia cells but also with melanoma cancer. These studies have only been conducted with laboratory cultures and on small rodents.

"Long term studies will need to be conducted with animals before studies will include human testing," Garrison said.

He said that Rutgers is cooperating with other research institutions but it will take years before it can be determined if asparagus does indeed offer health benefits to cancer patients.

In the meantime, Garrison said that he eats several pounds of asparagus a year, not necessarily for health benefits but because he likes it.

In addition, Garrison said that scientific research shows that Jersey Male Hybrid Asparagus contains more saponin than other varieties.

Scott Walker of Jersey Asparagus Farms said, "These findings will aide not only the medical community but also offers exciting new opportunities for the agricultural community. This breakthrough in medical/agricultural research will create a greater demand for asparagus."

Walker said that his firm is already gearing up for the demand by harvesting more seed from existing varieties and asking for Rutgers Research and Development staff to take an aggressive approach in developing new varieties.

"As scientists explore the many forms that can be employed in the consumption of asparagus, new markets will develop quickly," Walker said. "With this anticipated increase in demand for asparagus, growers around the world will be planting more asparagus."

Jersey Asparagus Farms, Inc., 105 Porchtown Rd., Pittsgrove, NJ 08318, can be reached on the web page on netscape at <http://www.jerseyasparagus.com>.

ROASTED ASPARAGUS

Preheat oven to 500 degrees. Heat the roasting pan in the oven before placing the asparagus into it.

2 1/2 pounds fresh asparagus, same size, washed and trimmed. Place in heated roasting pan. Roast for 10-15 minutes until just tender.

Serve with a bit of balsamic vinegar and salt and pepper.

Louise Graybeal
Renick, W.V.

STEAMED ASPARAGUS

12-20 same size asparagus spears

1 tablespoon unsalted butter
Coarse kosher salt
Freshly ground black pepper to taste

Place in the top of a steamer over boiling water. Steam for 2-3 minutes if asparagus is thin, 5-6 minutes for fat stems.

Remove the asparagus from steamer and dot with butter. Season with salt and pepper and serve. Yield: 2 servings.

Louise Graybeal
Renick, W.V.

Recipe Topics

If you have recipes for the topics listed below, please share them with us. We welcome your recipes, but ask that you include accurate measurements, a complete list of ingredients and clear instructions with each recipe you submit. Send your recipes to Lou Ann Good, Lancaster Farming, P.O. Box 609, Ephrata, PA 17522. Recipes should reach our office one week before publishing date.

April-	26-	Ethnic Dishes
May-	3-	Rhubarb
	10-	Your Mother's Favorite Recipe
	17-	What Can You Do With Tapioca?