

Asparagus

How Much To Plant

To produce enough asparagus for fresh table use, plant 10 crowns for each family member. If you are especially fond of asparagus or want a surplus to can or freeze, plant at least 25 plants for each family member. If you use the new hybrids reduce the number of plants by half.

Soil and Soil Preparation

Any well-drained soil will produce good asparagus. Use deep, fertile, sandy loam or loamy soil. If your soil is clay, you should condition it with peat moss, leaf mold, or straw so spears will emerge straight. Using a raised bed is especially helpful with heavy soils. Have a soil test made at least 6 months before planting. Take soil samples 12 inches deep. The soil pH should be 6.0 to 6.7 because asparagus grows poorly in acid soils. Choose a site relatively free of perennial broadleaf weeds and nut-grass. Start building up the organic matter (humus) content of the soil at least a year in advance of planting. This can be done by turning under green manure crops, animal manure, straw, peat moss or leaf mold. Till the soil deeply several times during the year to have it in fine tilth at the time of planting. Use commercial fertilizer in addition to manures. Follow soil test suggestions. On average soils that have not been tested, broadcast 3 to 5 lb of 5-10-10 per 100 ft² of bed.

Planting

Crowns (roots) should be planted in rows 5 feet apart with the crowns spaced 12 inches apart in the row. The distance between rows can be reduced, but this may shorten the life of the bed. Closer in-row spacing will increase yield. Use large, well-rooted, one-year-old, disease free crowns, purchased from a reliable source. To grow your own crowns, drill seed in the spring 1/2 inch deep and 2 inches apart in rows 2 to 3 ft apart. Germination is hastened by soaking seed in water for 5 to 6 days before planting. Dig and transplant the crowns the following spring. One oz of seed produces about 700 crowns.

In eastern North Carolina, plant the crowns in February. In the Piedmont and Mountains, plant in late winter after danger of hard freezes is over, but before plant growth starts. Plant the crowns in a furrow 8 inches deep. Make the furrow wide enough to accommodate the root system of the crowns when fully spread out. In placing the crowns in the furrow or trench be sure to have the buds pointing upward. Cover the crowns with 2 inches of soil. As the plants grow, pull soil around the plants gradually until the trench is filled.

Annual Care Of The Bed

Cultivate when necessary to control grass and weeds to insure a good crop of large spears. During the harvest period, asparagus can withstand shallow cultivation. Most weed management can be achieved chemically. For details see the *NC Agricultural Chemicals Manual* or contact your county Cooperative Extension agent.

Each spring just before the spears start to grow, broadcast a complete fertilizer such as 5-10-10 on the bed at the rate of 2 to 5 lb per 100 ft². This should be done about March 1 for the east and 2 weeks later for the rest of the state. Give the bed a second application of fertilizer at the end of the cutting season.

Allow the plants to grow until they have turned brown. Then cut down the fern and destroy it. If cut down before frost the next year's crop of spears is reduced.

Harvesting

Do not harvest asparagus the first growing season after planting crowns. It can be harvested (cut) for short time (not to exceed two weeks) the second year. Weak plants and small spears result from harvesting too much, too early. After the second year after planting crowns, harvest asparagus from 6 to 8 weeks each year. Weak plants should be harvested for less time.