

# Asparagus planting instructions

Planting asparagus is an investment, since one must wait 1-3 seasons after planting before harvesting. The investment is well worth the effort, however, as a well-prepared asparagus bed, in good soil, should produce abundantly for up to twenty years.

## Preparing your asparagus bed

To ensure the near neutral pH of 6.5 to 7.5 that is ideal for asparagus, test your soil prior to planting and amend your soil as necessary. Plant your asparagus where it will be neither crowded (especially by trees) nor in the way. Asparagus is a perennial, so plan for a permanent location. Allow four feet between the asparagus row and any other planting. Some gardeners put all their asparagus in a single row along the edge of the garden or in a row dividing the flower garden from the vegetable garden.

Asparagus itself requires full sun; a slight slope facing south will help to give it an early start. It should not be subjected to strong winds. If a windy location is all you have, it may be necessary to stake the plants once the harvesting season is over.

Ideally, the soil should be a well-drained, rich, sandy loam; heavier clay soils should be conditioned with plenty of organic matter. If you have no place to put your asparagus but in a poorly drained spot, raised beds can help a great deal. Asparagus loves rich soil. Our soils tend to be very low in nitrogen and organic matter, so add well-composted manure and other composts and organic fertilizers.

Finally, since you will need to irrigate occasionally, a handy water supply can be important.

## Before planting

Before planting, keep the roots from drying out by sprinkling them with water and covering them with a layer of moss or damp newspaper. Plan to plant as soon as possible and take care not to expose the roots to the drying sun or wind.

Don't allow the roots to dry out while awaiting planting. Some gardeners soak the roots overnight in a mixture of water and well-matured compost before planting, and plant them only when the sky is overcast in the evening.

Opinions vary about the best way to set in asparagus roots. To trench or not to trench is the big question.

## The trench method

Most experts (our staff included) recommend the tried-and-true trench method because the act of digging a trench not only gives the gardener a chance to prepare the soil properly but also gets rid of all the weeds. In addition, setting the roots deep in the soil protects them from future disturbance from weeding. The asparagus trench can be 12-15 inches wide and from 12-18 inches deep. Allow four to five feet between trenches.

If you want to extend your harvest over the longest possible period, vary the depth of your trench. The plants that are nearest the surface will send up shoots for an early harvest. Those planted a little deeper

will produce later, and the deepest will come up later still. You can add about three weeks to the harvest in this way.

If you choose to plant your asparagus roots all at the same depth, you can also extend the growing season by putting about five inches of a heavy mulch, such as heavy leaves, over the whole bed. Early in the spring, rake the mulch away from those rows that you want to produce first. The soil will warm up in the bare rows while the mulch will keep the other rows cool and delay the appearance of shoots. It is important to remove all but a fine layer of mulch as soon as the first spears begin to show. This will keep slugs away from the emerging spears. Also, shoots coming up through heavy mulch sometimes curl over.

#### The shallow planting method

To plant by this method, you mark your row, open a shallow furrow, and plant the roots so that the crowns – the points where the roots converge – are about a half inch below the surface of the ground. Then cover and firm the soil surface. This method is easy but has one major drawback: the roots are so close to the surface that cultivating and weeding become very difficult. Also, incorporating the necessary amounts of organic materials will be impossible with the roots laced so shallowly.

#### Soil preparation

Fill the bottom 4-8 inches (depending on how deep your trench is) with compost, well-rotted manure, or rich topsoil. Make a slight (1-2 inch) mound every foot along the trench.

#### Planting the roots

Plant one-year-old crowns in early spring when the soil temperature is at least 50 degrees F. Place an asparagus root crown carefully over each mound, spreading the roots out in a circle around the crown, making sure that the small buds on each root are facing up. Using the soil you dug from the trench, fill in between each mound so that the soil is level, then water well.

#### Maintenance

During the first season, it is especially important not to let the roots dry out. Water once a week, if necessary, enough to wet the soil eight inches deep. Too much water is also harmful – do not let water stand in the trench. After the first season, the deep roots of the asparagus plant will normally draw in enough moisture. However, if dry spells occur, two inches of water applied every two weeks should be sufficient.

It is important to keep the beds weed-free, especially of perennial weeds such as dock and dandelion. In early spring, till in the asparagus ferns from the previous year. Fertilize established plants before growth begins and again after harvest with a balanced organic fertilizer or composted manure. A light mulch, especially after the first of June, will discourage weed growth.

#### Harvest

Don't harvest any stalks the first year; this allows the plants to become well-established. The second year you can harvest for two weeks, the third year for four weeks, and in the fourth and following years for eight weeks. Stop harvesting when most of the spears are thinner than a pencil.

To harvest, simply snap or cut the spear at or just above the soil level.