

Growing Asparagus



INTRODUCTION

The fleshy green spears of asparagus are both succulent and tender and have been considered a delicacy since ancient times. This highly prized vegetable arrives with the coming of spring, when its shoots break through the soil and reach their 6-8 inch harvest length.

There is considerable work in starting an asparagus patch, and a certain amount of work in keeping it weed-free. With proper installation, your Asparagus patch should come back reliably year after year; so, plant it well, keep it mulched and well fed, and you can reap the rewards for the next 10-20 years.

Twenty-five plants is a reasonable number of plants for a family of four or for two people with an appetite for those sumptuous green spears. Asparagus needs rich soil with lots of nutrients, so have a good supply of compost or aged manure and some slow release organic fertilizer at planting time.

Since a mature Asparagus plant can reach 5' or more, consider planting them in unconventional spots in the garden: ie. in back of a flower bed, along a property line to create privacy in summer, or spotted throughout the landscape as summer accents.



East Bay Nursery
2332 San Pablo Ave., Berkeley, CA 94702
510.845.6490
www.eastbaynursery.com

PREPERATION

The current thinking is that asparagus still needs good loose soil, but that the crowns only need be planted 4-6 inches below the soil line. To create the best environment for your starts, create a trench 12 inches deep and 12 to 18 inches wide; then, loosen the soil in the bottom of the trench with a spading fork. The length of your trench will vary according to your situation (a 7.5 long trench will accommodate 5 plants).



Plan on working in 4-6 inches of aged compost into the loosened soil in the bottom of your trench and additional compost into the soil you will use for backfilling the trench. Don't skimp, even if you have good soil. Work the compost in with a spading fork or shovel. Loosely compact the soil in the bottom of the trench to prevent excessive settling after you plant; remember, asparagus wants loose soil so don't over compact.

If you have the heavy clay soil that is so prevalent in our area, fill your trench to within 3" from the top.

PLANTING

In your planting trench, start 9 inches in from the end and create a small mound of soil 2 inches high. Place the center of your asparagus crown at the top of this mound and evenly spread the roots out over the mound. Repeat this every 1 1/2 feet.



Back fill your trench to cover the tips of your crowns with one inch of soil. You should have 2-3 inches of trench that is unfilled. Later in summer, when your plants are about 2 feet tall, fill your trench completely.

If you are following the plan for heavy clay soils, your trench should be full after you cover the tips of your crowns with 1 inch of soil. As summer proceeds and your asparagus reaches 2 feet in height, bury the stems by creating a 4" mound the width and length of your trench. By mounding, you will keep the crowns planted to the proper depth while protecting them from rotting in the heavier soil.

WATERING

Water thoroughly after planting and regularly thereafter. Asparagus prefers even moisture throughout the growing season.

MULCHING

A thin layer of mulch can be applied in late summer of the first year, several weeks after you have filled your trench or created your mounds. This will help to help conserve water. Later in the fall of the first year, a 2-3 inch layer can be applied to reduce weeds and conserve water.

Once your asparagus is established, keep it well mulched with fresh composted material. Spring (after harvest) and fall applications will keep your weeds down and will help keep your soil loose and healthy by encouraging worm activity.

FERTILIZING

Asparagus feeds heavily. Apply a balanced organic or slow release synthetic fertilizers in late winter, just before the end of the rainy season, and again in early July. This will keep your plants well fed and your crowns healthy and productive.

HARVEST

Harvesting in the first year should be avoided at all costs; allow the new planting to establish itself.

It is also best to avoid harvesting in the second year. If you are going to cheat and harvest a few, be sure not to remove more than 1-2 shoots from each individual crown planted. Be sure you are getting 6-8 shoots from the crown before harvesting any.

In the third year, you can finally enjoy the "shoots" of your labor. You should still limit the duration of your harvest to 2-3 weeks. In the forth and subsequent years you can extend the harvest duration to 4-8 weeks.

To pick you asparagus, cut or break the shoots off at or just below ground level. If using a knife to cut, do so carefully to avoid damaging roots or un-emerged shoots. You should stop harvesting when your shoots are no longer thicker than a pencil.

The duration of harvest varies from year to year based on a number of factors including; plant health, weather, winter temperatures, and winter water. Keep your plants well fed and mulched for maximum yield.

