

Asparagus!

Published 3/6/19 – Picture of a single asparagus stalk from PublicDomainFiles.com

A distant cousin of the onion, asparagus has been consumed by humans for over 5,000 years. It originated in eastern Mediterranean countries and possibly Africa and was cultivated by the ancient Greeks partially for its pharmaceutical properties. Asparagus was largely forgotten during the Middle Ages but in the 16th and 17th centuries was served in the royal courts of Europe. By the 18th century it finally made its appearance in local marketplaces.

Asparagus is starting its annual emergence in central South Dakota gardens now, signalling the start of the harvest season. If you like asparagus and already have an established patch you probably know that if you let the spears get too big they turn into feathery stems and start producing seeds. Once the spears start appearing it almost takes daily excursions into the garden to catch the spears at their tastiest. Harvest when the spears are 5-7" tall, before the tips start to loosen and the stem starts to turn woody. You can cut or snap them off just above ground level. The first year after planting only harvest a few spears from each plant, only harvested for a couple of weeks, and then let everything else mature. The second year you can lengthen the harvest to three weeks, then subsequent years' harvest can go for four to six weeks or until only skinny spears less than one half inch are emerging .

If you want to start a new bed, it's cheapest and most common to plant bare root crowns. Depending on personal preferences, 25 plants will yield more than enough for a family of four. Because asparagus likes rich soil and no root competition, raised beds are not necessary but often used for asparagus. Raised beds are also helpful when planting the crowns as each crown should be planted 6-12" below the ground. Planted in the spring or early fall, dig a trench or hole 9-15" deep and shape a cone of dirt for the crowns to sit on with their roots trailing down the sides of the cone. Cover with enough soil to cover the crown and water well. As shoots start emerging and get to a couple of inches tall, cover again with soil. Periodically continue this process until the trench or hole is entirely filled.

For healthy plants and nice harvests, top dressing with an inch or so of composted organic material each year is recommended. They like moist soil so keep the beds well watered, especially during the first few years after planting. Remember they do not like root competition so with extra water may come weeds. Keeping the bed well mulched, especially in the beginning few years helps maintain even soil moisture and suppress weeds. Asparagus, like most vegetables, also like full sun.

A little effort up front can sure give some great rewards in a couple of years if asparagus is your thing.

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