Asparagus (*Asparagus officinalis* L.)

Asparagus is one of the earliest producing perennial vegetables each spring. It is dioecious, meaning that there are female and male plants, but only female plants produce berries. Generally, female plants produce larger spears, and male plants produce a greater number of smaller diameter, more uniform spears. Most of the newer hybrids, such as Jersey Giant, are all male plants, producing no seeds. A bed of asparagus can last 15 years or more, so choose the bed site carefully.

Choose a fertile, sunny, well-drained site with good moisture. Late spring frosts can kill emerged spears, so find an area that is not low-lying or susceptible to frost. Because asparagus plants have deep root systems, avoid areas with shallow soils or soils prone to water-saturation.

Common varieties are the older Washington series (Mary, Martha, and Waltham), the newer hybrids such as the Jersey series (Giant, Knight, Prince), and an open-pollinated variety called Viking KB-3. Although all of these varieties have done well in Minnesota, the Jersey series can suffer winter kill in northern Minnesota at -30°F if there is inadequate snow cover.

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**Voice Mail Line** 651-277-0151

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Chisago County Extension Office

Our office is located at the Ag Service Building in North Branch at 38814 Third Avenue.

Chisago County
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Planting  Asparagus can be started from seeds and then transplanted in the second year. Use seed with a high germination rate and plant seed as soon as soil is workable. In the next year, dig crowns in early April before buds start to grow, then transplant them to the desired location. Direct seeding is not recommended. Alternatively, purchased crowns can be planted. Most people plant asparagus from purchased crowns because this is easier and you get a crop at least one year earlier. Purchase crowns that are at least one-year old. Plant crown buds upward in a trench or furrow, about 12-18 inches apart and 6-8 inches deep. Cover the crowns with 2-3 inches of soil immediately after planting to keep them from drying out, and then continue to add soil as the shoots emerge, until eventually the furrow is filled by the end of the first growing season. Asparagus crowns will continue to enlarge both vertically and horizontally over several years so planting at the appropriate depth is critical.

Watering  Adequate soil moisture is necessary at planting for good root and fern development. Asparagus plants have deep roots, most of the water uptake takes place in the top 6-12 inches of soil.

Soil pH and Fertility   Asparagus needs 3 years to develop a large root system and maximum fern growth to support future spear production. It grows best in soils with pH of 6.5-7.0 and does not tolerate extreme acid soils. Have your soil tested (see Understanding Your Soil Test Report) to determine its pH and whether you need to amend it. It is best to test soil at least every 3 years and follow test recommendations.

Add some well-rotted manure or compost, or a garden fertilizer at a rate of 1 to 1.5 pounds per 100 sq. ft. at planting. And again in the second and third years after planting. Addition of manure or compost can add micronutrients and organic matter to soil (see Composting and Mulching). After the planting is established, it is generally unnecessary to add fertilizer until after harvest. Add fertilizer based on soil test results to established plantings.

Controlling Weeds   Eliminate all perennial weeds before planting crowns. Manage annual weeds by adding 3-4 inches of mulch on top of beds. Do not till soil more than 3-4 inches deep to avoid damaging feeder roots.

Common insect pests on asparagus in Minnesota are the common and spotted asparagus beetle. They primarily damage asparagus by feeding on the spears resulting in browning and scarring. The feeding can also cause asparagus shoots to bend over into a shepherd’s crook.

Common diseases of asparagus - Asparagus rust - yellow to rusty orange spots form on stems after harvest, releasing powdery orange spores. Purple spot - sunken purple spots on asparagus spears and tan spots with a purple border on mature stems-plants have poor growth; leaves and stems may yellow and die back. Crown rot resistant varieties include Viking KB-3, Jersey Giant, and Jersey Knight. In addition the Jersey line varieties have some resistance to rust. If rust or purple spot appears in the garden, remove and destroy all plant stems after the first hard frost in the fall. Plant new asparagus plants far enough apart so that there is room for good air circulation when mature.

Harvesting   Leave old asparagus ferns until spring before chopping or mowing them. After spears appear, harvest when 6-8 inches long. Snap spears off at the soil surface. Allow spears remaining after July 1 to develop into ferns.

The mission of the University of Minnesota Master Gardener program: “Use research-based horticultural knowledge and practices to deliver educational outreach and project-based efforts that inspire change and promote healthy people, healthy communities and a healthy planet.”

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