



All About: Asparagus

The first asparagus harvest of the season feels like the true harbinger of spring in the vegetable garden. The bright green, silky smooth, stately stems poking through the soil mean there's no turning back. From here on there will be radishes and turnips, spinach, lettuces, and green onions...the list will continue. But for now, no one's disappointed with just asparagus!

Asparagus is a perennial crop, which means it returns year after year. If it's well tended it can survive for 15 years or more in the garden! Because the crop can grow for so many years in one location, it's important to carefully prepare the growing space. Like most vegetable crops, asparagus prefers loamy, well-drained, fertile soil, with a pH around 7 (neutral). Be sure to add plenty of compost, as this crop needs lots of nutrients. It's worth noting that asparagus plants can tolerate partial shade, which is very uncommon for vegetables! Beds should be prepared to a depth of at least one foot.

This crop takes a long-term investment. If you're in it for the long haul, and want to get your asparagus bed started, here's the info for you!

Purchase seedlings, "crowns" (a bundle of roots), or start your own asparagus plants from seed before planting outside in late April or early May. Once asparagus is planted, the waiting begins. Plants will take time to put down a substantial amount of roots, which will support the plant growth. The first year, don't harvest at all. In the second spring, you can pick a few spears if they are as thick as your finger - but don't harvest over a period longer than two weeks. In the third year, pick all that are finger-sized, for a month-6 weeks. Finally, in the *fourth year*, and from here on out, you may harvest for up to 2 months! Asparagus appreciates some watering and compost or manure applications every fall. Keep your plants healthy and well-fed and they will reward you with beautiful and prolific harvest!

No space, time, or commitment to plant your own? Find some amazing local asparagus through your CSA, farm stand, or local farmer's market. Look for tender, bright-colored stems that look crisp and fresh. The little leaves at the top should be tight against the stem, and a really fresh bunch will squeak when compacted. Fresh-picked asparagus puts the out-of-season stuff to shame. The more recently it was harvested, the sweeter and more delicious it will be.

Fresh asparagus offers a myriad of nutrients, with tons of potassium, iron, folate, and Vitamin K. But we know you mainly want to eat it because it's tasty! As when cooking any fresh-harvested produce, a simple recipe is best to avoid smothering the fresh flavor. Here are a few we recommend:

[Simple Grilled Asparagus](#)

[Roasted Asparagus](#)

[Asparagus and Ricotta Pizza](#)

[Linguini with Asparagus and Egg](#)

Asparagus Fun Facts:

- In some countries in Europe, white asparagus is eaten more often than green. Its white color comes from being grown in conditions without any light.
- Some varieties of asparagus are purple! They usually turn green when cooked, unless prepared with an acid like lemon or vinegar.
- In the summer, asparagus plants develop tall, fern-like fronds. These function as leaves and feed the roots of the plant, so leave them until they die back in the late fall.
- Asparagus plants are either male or female. Planting all-male varieties (examples: Jersey Supreme, Jersey Knight) increases yields, as the plants put more energy into roots and spears, rather than seeds.



Asparagus seedlings, growing and getting ready for the Grow Pittsburgh seedling sales!