



Asparagus

Asparagus officinalis

Asparagus is high in potassium and great for fibre. Grow your own perennial crop for years of enjoyment. There are male and female Asparagus plants. The males have better quality spears and the females produce little red berries in autumn. They are not difficult to grow and will thrive under a variety of conditions. With proper care, your asparagus bed should produce for 15 years or more.

How to grow:

The most popular starting method is the purchase of Asparagus crowns, with their long, fleshy roots. The crown of the Asparagus is where the spears will grow from. Asparagus crowns are available for purchase and planting in winter through to early spring, starting from around May onwards.

Asparagus can also be grown by seed or from seedlings. After planting, leave it for about two or three years for a strong root system to develop. You must not pick any of the crop, just let it grow naturally.

Asparagus are heavy feeders and require a deep, friable, rich soil that is well prepared before planting. If you have heavy clay soil, you'll need to dig in plenty of gypsum and compost. Asparagus love plenty of organic matter such as cow manure, sheep manure, compost or pelletised organic fertiliser products as Rapid Raiser or Dynamic Lifter.

To plant crowns, make a little mound at the bottom of the planting hole or do the same as a trench if you're planting higher numbers. Sit the crown nicely on top of the mound with the roots spread on both sides. Plant your crowns about 40cm apart and water-in well once planted. In spring, little shoots will appear, which is a good time to apply some organic based fertiliser such as blood and bone. You can also plant your crowns, seeds or seedlings in large pots.

If you've grown your Asparagus by crown, the crown and root system must be allowed to develop for one year before harvesting begins. You may be tempted to do some harvesting the first year after planting but bear in mind that removing spears will result in stress that will weaken your plants. Asparagus can be harvested for a 2 to 3-week period the second year after planting. During the third, fourth and subsequent years, a full cutting season of 6 to 10 weeks are permissible.

It is not advisable to continue cutting well-established asparagus plants after the end of December in any year. During the cutting period, the plant draws on food reserves stored in the root system during the previous growing season. The top growth must be allowed to develop after December in order to replace the food stores in the fleshy roots. Cutting is best done with a sharp knife that is pushed into the ground so that it severs the spear about 2.5cm (1 inch) below ground.

Once the plants are around 3 to 4 years old you should find they go yellow in autumn, which is the time to cut them back to ground level. The Asparagus bed will be bare until spring. Apart from slugs and snails in spring, Asparagus have very few pests and diseases.