

## How to grow asparagus

Asparagus must be the tastiest plant you can grow.

Very few vegetables are so popular that some completely unrelated plants hijack the word asparagus to make themselves sound more alluring. When smothered in butter, asparagus pea is faintly reminiscent of asparagus, but, much as I love kale, asparagus kale is pushing it a bit.

Only a brave man should write about asparagus. Two hundred and fifty years ago, that indomitable Scots gardener, James Justice<sup>1</sup>, tells us that growing asparagus could be 'practised with very bad success... owing to the ignorance of people who [only do] what they have heard of, or possibly read in some book..... I will venture to affirm that I had as good grass [asparagus] as ever came to market.' Like Justice, I have produced pretty good results over more than 30 years, so will dare to tackle this subject.

When planted properly in a good position, asparagus crowns should keep cropping for at least 20 years, so choose plants carefully. When you're buying new crowns, always select 'male only' varieties, to be sure of a better crop. Male plants emerge earlier in the spring and remain productive for longer.

A female plant produces attractive flowers and seed heads, but it is using valuable nutrients to produce seed rather than prepare for next year's harvest. If self-sown seed does germinate, it'll be too close to the parent plant and will compete for nutrients. And if you're growing an F1 cultivar, like Backlim F1, the next generation won't breed true to the parent.

Like its wild ancestor, cultivated asparagus has a complex root system. The wild asparagus you find along coastal Mediterranean hillsides, grows in thin, rocky soil, so its roots need to dive deep into the rock for moisture and nutrients. The plant also has roots close to the surface to capture any available rain or dew. Fleshy asparagus roots, growing close to the surface, store moisture more efficiently than thin ones. This explains why young asparagus crowns look like a spider with fat, fleshy legs, and why an asparagus bed should be deep and fertile.

Only consider growing asparagus if you've plenty space. I recommend planting crowns 45cm apart in a row, with 90cm between rows.

Ideally, the bed should be double-dug the previous autumn. Dig out a row of soil in the bed and put it in a barrow. Fork over the soil underneath and mix in well-rotted manure or good compost. Cover this with soil from the second row and fork over the lower layer as before. Continue along the bed and add in the soil from your barrow at the end of the bed. This should provide free-draining soil, essential for asparagus.

If you can lay hands on some rams' horns, you could follow the technique described by 17<sup>th</sup> Century agriculturalist, John Worlidge.<sup>2</sup> 'Some curious persons put rams-horns at the bottom of the trench. They hold for certain that rams-horns have a certain Sympathy with Asparagus which makes them prosper the better.' Alternatively, mix in hoof and horn as a slow-release fertiliser.

In March or early April, prepare the bed for asparagus crowns. Dig out a trench, 30cm deep, piling the soil to one side. Use good compost to make a shallow mound, 7cm high, along the middle of the trench. Lay the crowns along the mound, 45cm apart, spreading the roots to each side of the mound. Gradually fill the trench with soil until the trench is full.

If planting one-year-old crowns, forswear harvesting the following year, but reward yourself with a light picking in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year. You can take a few spears the next year from 2 year-old crowns. Keep the asparagus bed well fed every year by adding a thin layer of good compost in early spring. Add a generous sprinkling of seaweed meal to the bed when you stop cutting spears. This is the perfect feed for coastal plants like asparagus. [Asparagus crowns are available from Scottish asparagus grower, A.H.Pattullo tel. 01307 840303; email [pattulloeassie@btinternet.com](mailto:pattulloeassie@btinternet.com)]

<sup>1</sup>James Justice 'The Scots gardeners director'

<sup>2</sup>David Stuart 'The Kitchen Garden''