

## Growing and Harvesting Asparagus in the Austin Vicinity

**Where to Plant Asparagus:** Asparagus does best with 5 or 6 hours of sun each day. In the Austin area, some afternoon shade is beneficial. Select a spot that offers good drainage and can host a mature-sized plant (4-5 feet in height, 6 feet or more in width) and add lots of organic matter. Asparagus is a long-lived perennial vegetable; the same plant can be harvested for 10 to 15 years so consider that when choosing a site. Dig a 4-6 inch wide trench that is 6-12 inches deep. Plant the crowns in the bottom of the trough about 12 inches apart. Fill in the trench with only 2-3 inches of soil. As you go through the first season you will continue to fill the trench until it is full at the end of the year.

**When to Plant Crowns:** Late fall through late winter, early spring. Asparagus can be grown from seed, but asparagus seeds produce both male and female plants. Commercially sold crowns typically produce male plants, which are more vigorous producers than female plants because they don't expend energy in seed production. UC 157 is an all-male hybrid.

**How to Plant Crowns:** Asparagus is salt-tolerant and a heavy feeder. It prefers soil very rich in organic matter. Recommended soil amendments include (perhaps a mix of) composted manure, worm castings, cotton bur compost, and lava sand. Good drainage is also essential.

- For best results, soak roots overnight in a liquified seaweed solution. If you don't soak the roots, watering them in at planting time with a seaweed solution is recommended.
- Spread roots radially and plant crowns 3-4 inches deep.
- Cover with compost or organic soil and mulch heavily.
- Water deeply when the soil dries out at root depth.

**Harvesting Asparagus:** Bare-root crowns of asparagus are usually one year old. Most sources discourage harvesting the first year's growth. The goal during the first years of cultivation is to enable the plant to develop a strong and healthy root system. By the third year, the asparagus bed should be in full production. The harvest season is anywhere from 4-8 weeks long and it's recommended to try various harvest intervals, perhaps harvesting periodically during the cooler seasons. As the harvesting period progresses, spears will often become thinner. This is a good indicator that the harvesting period is nearing completion. It is best to not harvest all emerging shoots – allow some shoots to grow and produce foliage. You can harvest shoots above ground or below ground. Once harvest is complete the spears will grow into fern-like stalks reaching 6 feet tall. It is a beautiful plant once fully grown and could be part of a flower garden if planted toward the back.

**Maintaining an Established Asparagus Plant:** Established plants benefit from heavy, complete fertilization – most organic fertilization programs will be sufficient, but feel free to implement them a bit more liberally with asparagus. Nitrogen-rich fertilizers such as bat guano and fish emulsion are also recommended. If plants seem unresponsive to fertilizers, Epsom salts may assist in making nitrogen more available to the plant.

A significant dormant period is essential to healthy stalk production. Cut plants back to the ground when they turn brown, or after the first frost, and fertilize afterwards. In hot-summer, mild-winter areas like Austin, some sources recommend allowing the plant to go dormant during the summer by simply cutting off the water supply to the plant.