

Growing Asparagus in Montana



Asparagus is one of the most permanent and dependable of home garden vegetables. Plants take 2-3 years to come into full production, but then furnish delicious spears every spring for many years. The patience and care taken at planting time will be well worth the bountiful harvests of asparagus you will receive year after year. Not only are they a delicious addition to your garden, asparagus are tall, feathery, graceful, and highly ornamental. Use asparagus along a sunny fence or as a background for flowers or vegetables.



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Planting

Asparagus can be grown on most any type of soil that is well drained. They tolerate higher soil salinity than most other garden plants.

Destroy all perennial weeds by mulching or cultivating. To prepare the bed, dig a trench 14-16" deep and 12" wide. Space trenches 4-6' apart. Mix the soil that is dug out of the trenches with equal parts of compost, peat moss or well-aged manure. Put 4 inches of compost or well-aged manure mixed with garden soil into the bottom of the trench. Apply a pound of bone meal for every 20 square feet. The phosphorus in bone meal encourages the development of strong roots. Toss about an inch of garden soil over the bone meal, and mix again.

Place the plants in the trench about 18" apart so the crown of a bare root plant or the soil level of a plant in a pot are 6" below the natural level of the soil. Cover plants with about 1 inch of soil, firm gently around the plant and water well. In about 2 weeks, shoots will appear. When the shoots reach about 3" high, spread the reserved soil-compost mixture around the shoots in a 1-2 inch layer, taking care to leave the tips of the shoots showing. Roots will sprout all along the shoots to create an extensive root system. Repeat this procedure every week or so until the soil in the trench is level with existing soil.

Weed control

It is important to keep weeds and grass out of the planting bed to encourage vigorous growth and to eliminate competition for water and nutrients. We recommend no herbicide be used in the home asparagus patch. You can control some weeds early in the spring before spears come up by hoeing or by very shallow tilling. Later, after the cutting season, hoe or cultivate again to destroy broadleaved weeds. Keeping the beds well mulched will help to reduce weeds and help retain moisture in the soil.

Watering and Fertilizing

Established beds require little care. Water asparagus plants regularly throughout the growing season. A fertilizer with equal amounts of nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium (such as 10-10-10 or 14-14-14) applied at a rate of 2 cups per 10' of row can be mixed into the beds in late fall, early spring or after the harvest has ended for the season (about July 4). The plants can also be fertilized annually by mixing a couple of inches of well-rotted manure or compost to the beds.

Harvesting

Asparagus beds reach full production after three years and peak production in about eight years, when the yield of spears can reach five pounds per 100 square feet. A properly managed bed remains productive for 12 to 15 years. Some over 30 years old are still fairly productive. Don't harvest shoots the first and second year. Allow the spears to go to seed and let stand until spring, this will help to trap and hold snow, which will furnish protection to root crowns. The following years' cuttings may begin when the first shoots appear and continue for about 6 weeks, or no later than July 4. Spears are ready to cut when they are 8-10 inches tall. Cutting too soon reduces yield; cutting too late increases spear toughness. To cut, push a knife into the soil and cut the shoot 1-2 inches below the soil surface being careful not to injure adjacent developing spears. After you stop cutting the spears, let the tops of the remaining spears develop to produce leaves and seeds. Food is manufactured in the leaves and then stored in the roots to produce shoots the following spring.

Mulching

Apply an insulating mulch of straw or similar material to the bed in late November and remove it in early spring when danger of severe cold has passed. If not removed it will keep the ground cool and delay emer-

Varieties

• Jersey Knight

Asparagus officinalis 'Jersey Knight'
Zone 3 Height 3-6" Space 18" Green
Easy to grow, all roots are predominantly male plants; vigorous grower, highly disease resistant and produces high yields.

• Purple Passion

Asparagus officinalis 'Purple Passion'
Zone 3 Height 3-6" Space 18" Deep Burgundy
Beautiful deep burgundy in color, more tender, mild and sweeter than other varieties. Vigorous and productive, producing spears ready for harvest a year earlier than most varieties.

RECIPES

Cream of Asparagus Soup

Active time: 20 minutes Start to finish: 50 minutes

2 lb. green asparagus
1 large onion, chopped
3 Tbsp. unsalted butter
5 to 6 cups chicken broth
1/2 c. crème fraîche or heavy cream
1/4 tsp. fresh lemon juice, or to taste

Cut tips from 12 asparagus 1 1/2 inches from top and halve tips lengthwise if thick. Reserve for garnish. Cut stalks and remaining asparagus into 1/2 inch pieces.

Cook onion in 2 tablespoons butter in a 4-quart heavy pot over moderately low heat, stirring, until softened. Add asparagus pieces and salt and pepper to taste, then cook, stirring, 5 minutes. Add 5 cups broth and simmer, covered, until asparagus is very tender, 15 to 20 minutes.

While soup simmers, cook reserved asparagus tips in boiling salted water until just tender, 3 to 4 minutes, then drain.

Puree soup in batches in a blender until smooth, transferring to a bowl (use caution when blending hot liquids), and return to pan. Stir in crème fraîche or heavy cream, then add more broth to thin soup to desired consistency. Season with salt and pepper. Bring soup to a boil and whisk in remaining tablespoon butter.

Add lemon juice and garnish with asparagus tips.

Cook's note: Soup keeps, covered and chilled, 2 days. If making ahead, add last tablespoon butter and lemon juice after reheating.

Grilled Asparagus

Active time: 15 minutes Start to finish: 30 minutes

1 1/2 lb. medium asparagus (24), trimmed
2 Tbsp. extra-virgin olive oil
Kosher salt

Special equipment: 8 (6-inch) wooden skewers, soaked in warm water for 10 minutes.

Prepare grill. Divide asparagus into 4 bunches. Align each bunch in a flat row and thread 2 skewers cross-wise through each bunch. Brush asparagus with oil and season with kosher salt.

Grill asparagus on an oiled rack set 5 to 6 inches over glowing coals until tender, 3 to 5 minutes on each side.

Cook's note: The parallel skewers make it easier to turn the asparagus. If outdoor grilling isn't an option, asparagus may also be grilled in a well-seasoned ridged grill pan over moderately high heat. Makes 4 servings.

Fried Eggs and Asparagus with Parmesan

Active time: 20 minutes Start to finish: 25 minutes
Set rack in upper third of oven, preheat oven to 425°F.

1 1/2 lb. medium asparagus, trimmed and, if desired, peeled
2 1/2 Tbsp. unsalted butter
2/3 c. freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano (2 oz.)
4 large eggs

Cook asparagus in a large deep skillet of boiling salted water until crisp-tender, about 4 minutes. Transfer with tongs to paper towels to drain.

Generously butter gratin dishes using 1/2 tablespoon butter total, then divide asparagus between them. Season with salt and pepper, then sprinkle with half of cheese.

Heat remaining 2 tablespoons butter in a 10-inch non-stick skillet over moderately high heat until foam subsides, then fry eggs, seasoning with salt and pepper, until whites are barely set, about 2 minutes.

Carefully transfer 2 eggs to each gratin dish with a slotted spatula, placing on top of asparagus. Sprinkle eggs with remaining cheese and drizzle with any butter remaining in skillet.

Bake in upper third of oven until cheese is melted and eggs are cooked as desired, 4 - 5 minutes for runny yolks.

Makes 2 (main course) servings.

Roasted Asparagus Bundles

This is a quick, attractive dish, terrific with softly fried eggs for a spring weekend breakfast, as an appetizer for lunch or dinner, or as a side vegetable.

For the seasoned bread crumbs:

1-1/2 tsp extra-virgin olive oil or garlic oil
1 tsp. minced garlic
1/4 c. fine dried bread crumbs
Pinch gray salt
Freshly ground pepper
1 Tbsp. finely chopped fresh parsley
1 tsp. freshly grated lemon zest
1 Tbsp. freshly grated Parmesan cheese

Unsalted butter for baking dish

1 large bunch asparagus, about 1 pound, trimmed to even lengths and cooked for 4 minutes in boiling, salted water
2 Tbsp. Extra-virgin olive oil
Gray salt and freshly ground pepper
8 thin slices prosciutto

To make the seasoned bread crumbs, heat the olive oil in a small skillet over medium-high heat until hot. Add the garlic and sauté briefly until pale gold. Add the bread crumbs, season with salt and pepper, and lower the heat to medium. Cook, stirring occasionally, until the bread crumbs are toasted, about 3 minutes. Pour into a small bowl and add the parsley, lemon zest, and Parmesan. Toss well. (The crumbs keep, tightly sealed and refrigerated, for several days.)

Preheat the oven to 400°F. Butter a shallow baking dish that is long enough to hold the asparagus. Toss the cooled asparagus with olive oil and season with salt and pepper.

Divide the asparagus into 4 equal bundles. Arrange 2 slices of the prosciutto on a work surface so they slightly overlap each other. Place an asparagus bundle on top and roll up carefully in the prosciutto. Arrange in the prepared baking dish. Flatten the top of each bundle slightly and sprinkle with one-fourth of the seasoned bread crumbs.

Roast in the oven until heated through and crisp, about 10 minutes. Serve at once. Makes 4 servings.



2025 2nd Ave. NW
Great Falls, MT 59404
Phone: 406-727-0950
Fax: 406-727-4817
www.forde-nursery.com

