



## Guide to Growing Asparagus

An asparagus bed can remain productive for 10 to 20 years. Ten crowns, once established should produce an average yield of 8kg (17lb) annually.

### Site/Soil

Asparagus will do well on a range of soil types from clay to sand, provided the drainage is good, even quite poor land will prove satisfactory. The plants fare best on alkaline soils which have a pH between 6.3 and 7.5. Sites which are exposed or low lying and therefore potential frost pockets should be avoided – nor should asparagus be grown on ground that has previously grown this vegetable.

### Cultivation

The best way to grow asparagus is in raised beds – this method gives excellent drainage. Alternatively, it can be grown in flat beds without earthing up, but the spears will not be as large. However the preparation of the bed is easier and the crop is harvested earlier because the crowns are much nearer the surface and the spears grow in direct response to the soil temperature.

The ground is best prepared in the autumn prior to planting by double digging and at the same time incorporating into the top 22cm (9in) a generous dressing of well rotted manure or compost. It is essential that the preparation should include the ridding of any perennial weeds that may be present, either by forking them out or by the application of chemical herbicides.

Only one year old crowns should ever be planted; they establish themselves much quicker than 2 or 3 year old crowns which always suffer a setback when they are transplanted. If planting cannot be undertaken immediately, the plants should be removed from the package and spread out in a frost free place where there is some free air circulation. The roots should not be allowed to dry out to the point where they begin to shrivel.

The crowns should be planted in the spring to a depth of 12cm (5in). The usual method is to excavate a trench 30cm wide and 20cm deep (12in by 8in) and a mound about 7cm (3in) made in the bottom on the trench. The crowns are laid on the mound with the roots spread out in all directions, then covered with about 5cm (2in) of loose soil.

As the shoots grow, so the trench is gradually filled in with more soil. It is worth while broadcasting a fertiliser over the surface of the soil above the estimated root area immediately after planting, selecting one that is high in nitrogen and potash, but low in phosphates. Water is essential in the early stages of establishment. During the early years, 3oz/yd<sup>2</sup> of Growmore (7-7-7) should be broadcast in March over the estimated root area. In the cutting years, the amount should be reduced by one third. A further application of nitrogen applied during the fern growing period will improve fern growth and ultimate bud formation for the following year's crop.

Usually asparagus is grown in single rows which are 1.35m (4ft 6in) from one another with the plants spaced 37-45cm (15-18in) apart in the rows. Closer spacing, say not less than 30cm (12in) between plants and the same distance between the rows may give higher yields but the spears will not be so thick at these spacings and if there are several rows planted, it would save space by planting them in three row beds, each bed being separated by a 60cm (24in) wide pathway.

During the growing season the bed should be kept free of weeds by shallow hoeing. Tumbleweed may be used in amongst the plants during the summer months provided it is not allowed to come into contact with Fern. Fern that is liable to be blown over by the wind should be supported with canes and twine. Once the fern has turned yellow in the autumn, it should be cut down to 2cm (1in) from ground level. Asparagus does not benefit from mulches of either manure or compost, nor applications of salt, as is widely thought.

### Harvesting

Cutting normally starts during the second half of April when the spears are 17-20cm (7-8in) high. They are cut an inch or so below ground level, using a sharp knife. As a general rule asparagus should not be cut until the second year following planting and then only two or three spears per plant until the end of May; in succeeding years the harvesting period should be allowed to continue until the 21<sup>st</sup> June or thereabouts and then discontinued.

### Pests

It may be necessary to place traps or broadcast slug pellets over the area to control slugs which feed on emerging spears. In some areas the plants can be severely damaged by the asparagus beetle which feeds on the stems and foliage, often stripping the foliage completely. This pest can be controlled with an organic spray containing pyrethrum.