

# Asparagus

With the crop peaking in April and May, asparagus is one of spring's first vegetables. The Mediterranean native is appearing in local markets now. A member of the lily family, asparagus is closely related to onions and leeks, but it is not at all like them in appearance or flavor. Green asparagus is the most common variety in America but it can be found in white and green-violet, too.

With less than 4 calories per spear, asparagus is high in fiber and several vitamins and minerals. It is an especially rich source of iron and folate, one of the vitamins recommended before and during pregnancy that may prevent some birth defects.

When choosing fresh asparagus, look for firm stalks with a rich green or violet-green color. White asparagus is grown in low light, so it does not absorb chlorophyll, which is responsible for the green color. The appearance is different from the green variety, but the taste is the same.

People often think the size of the asparagus spears indicates tenderness and will choose thin stalks, but this isn't true. Larger stalks typically offer the best flavor and quality while a thinner stalk can indicate toughness or late-season growth.

Look for stalks of similar size in diameter so they will cook evenly. Select straight and firm spears with compact tips. An open head happens when the weather warms and the head grows too fast. Avoid wilted, limp, or flat stalks.

It is best to eat asparagus the day it is purchased. If it must be stored, trim the stem ends about 1/4 inch, stand them in a jar or glass with about an inch of water, cover the container with a plastic bag, and then refrigerate it. Or, wrap a moist paper towel around the stem ends, and seal them in a plastic bag. Use within two or three days.

When you are ready to prepare the asparagus, wash it thoroughly. Break off the woody stems by bending them until they break at the natural point. If the asparagus is a little old and the entire length of the stalk is tough, remove the skin with a vegetable peeler.

Fresh asparagus can be eaten raw or incorporated into salads, sandwich fillings, casseroles, and other side dishes. It can usually be substituted for peas or broccoli.

Cooked spears should be served while they are still bright green. A dull green color indicates that the asparagus has been over-cooked, and the flavor and vitamins have been lost.

Traditionally asparagus is cooked standing up in water with the tender tips above the water level. Use kitchen string to tie the stalks together so they'll stand up easily. Only cook asparagus until the stalks are crisp-tender. Be aware that residual heat will continue to cook the spears for 30 to 60 seconds after they're removed from the heat.

Asparagus lends itself well to stir-frying. Cut the spears diagonally in 1/2 inch pieces, leaving the tips whole. Stir-fry the pieces in a small amount of butter or hot oil in a skillet or wok at medium high heat. Stir them constantly until they are tender-crisp in about 3 to 5 minutes.

To cook in the microwave, place one pound of asparagus in a microwavable baking dish or serving bowl. If you're cooking whole spears, arrange them with the tips in the center. Add about 1/4 cup water and cover the container tightly. Microwave them at 100% power for 4 to 7 minutes for spears or 3 to 5

minutes for cuts and tips. Stir or turn them halfway through the cooking time, especially if your microwave does not have the revolving plate feature.

Chop and use leftover cooked asparagus in omelets, soups or stir-frys, adding it at the last minute just so it warms through but doesn't overcook. Overcooked leftover asparagus can be pureed and used for soups or sauces.

In addition to these asparagus "tips," there are many ways to enjoy fresh asparagus.

### **Roasted Asparagus**

Toss asparagus spears with olive oil and minced garlic. Place on baking sheet in a single layer. Sprinkle with salt and pepper. Roast uncovered at 450°F for 12 minutes, shaking pan once or twice to turn spears. When done, spears should be crisp-tender. Drizzle with balsamic vinaigrette, if desired.

### **Marinated Asparagus Salad**

1 pound fresh asparagus  
1 small onion, halved and thinly sliced

1 or 2 tomatoes, chopped  
Italian salad dressing

Cook asparagus by any of the methods described above. Cool. Combine with onion and tomatoes and enough salad dressing to moisten (about 2 to 3 tablespoons.) Stir gently. Cover and refrigerate several hours or overnight. Stir again before serving. Yield: 4 servings Calories-88 per serving; Fat- 9 grams per serving

### **Asparagus with Lemon**

1 pound asparagus, washed and trimmed  
1 teaspoon olive oil

2 tablespoons lemon juice  
Salt and black pepper to taste

In a large saucepan, place asparagus in 1 inch boiling water. Cover and steam for 5 minutes or until asparagus is bright green and tender. Rinse asparagus under cold water and drain. In a small bowl, combine oil and lemon juice. Pour over asparagus. Season with salt and pepper to taste.

Yield: 4 servings Nutrition Information per serving: 70 calories, 3g fat, 0g saturated fat, 0mg cholesterol, 0g trans fat, 0mg sodium, 9g carbohydrate, 5g dietary fiber.

### **Asparagus Quiche**

9-inch pastry shell  
8 slices of bacon, cooked crisp  
2 cups cooked asparagus, cut into 1-inch pieces  
1 cup Swiss cheese, shredded  
1 cup low-fat milk

3 eggs, lightly beaten  
1/4 teaspoon nutmeg  
Dash of pepper  
1 teaspoon dried tarragon  
1/2 teaspoon salt

Prick pastry shell with fork and bake in preheated 450°F oven for 7 minutes. Cool. Layer crumbled bacon, asparagus, and cheese in pie shell. In a bowl, mix low-fat milk, eggs, and seasonings. Pour over cheese. Bake at 350°F for 30 minutes or until set.

Yield: 8 servings. Nutritional Analysis: 240 calories, 13 g protein, 12 g carbohydrate, 1 g fiber, 15 g fat, 108 mg cholesterol, 585 mg sodium.

*Recipes from publications from University of Kentucky, Clemson University and Iowa State University Extension Service.*

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Want to learn how to make jelly and jam? Register for one of the beginner's classes on May 5 at the Berkeley County Youth Fairgrounds. The afternoon class from 2 to 4, or evening class from 6 to 8, will cover basics of making your own jelly or jam. Call the Berkeley County Extension office at 304.264.1936 to register. Space is limited.