

Asparagus

One of the joys of spring is picking fresh asparagus spears from the garden. The asparagus that you pick this year was planted at least a year ago if not more.

Asparagus is a long-lived perennial vegetable crop that can be productive for 15 or more years if given proper care. A few people have asparagus beds that are over 50 years old. It comes back year after year from the crown (the short stem near the roots) and the roots. The crown actually expands with age, producing more spears each year.

The name, Asparagus, comes from the Greek aspharagos or asparagos, and originates from the Persian asparag, meaning "sprout" or "shoot." Asparagus has been cultivated for thousands of years. It is believed to have been domesticated by the Macedonians about 200 B.C. It is native to Eurasia and is believed to have grown wild in seaside dunes along the Mediterranean Sea and the British Isles. It was brought to North America by English and Dutch colonists. Thomas Jefferson cultivated it in his gardens at Monticello. Asparagus is a member of the Lily family and is related to onions, leeks, and garlic.

When you want to plant asparagus buy one-year-old, healthy, disease free crowns from a reputable crown grower. You can plant asparagus seed; however, caring for the small seedlings until they become established can be time consuming. Because the seeds are spaced a few inches apart, the crowns will have to be dug and transplanted to their permanent, wider spaced location in the garden after one year. This results in one year of potential spear production being lost due to transplanting.

Select all-male asparagus varieties such as Greenwich, Jersey Gem or Jersey Prince which are all resistant to rust. The all-male varieties produce spears only on male plants. Female plants have to expend more energy to produce the seeds that decreases the yields of asparagus spears on female plants.

Original plantings of asparagus in the U.S. were mostly of the Washington varieties, Mary, Martha or Waltham Washington. These are unimproved, non-hybrid varieties. The older varieties of asparagus such as 'Martha Washington' have both male and female spears. The female plants produce spears that eventually grow to produce flowers and seed that not only take extra energy to produce, reducing spear production, but also sow seeds that create a jungle of little asparagus plants. Plant breeders have developed new hybrid varieties that are more productive and better adapted to tough soil conditions. Many are in the "Jersey" series from a breeding program in New Jersey.

Any preparation for planting asparagus should begin the year before you plan to plant. Begin with a soil test. Asparagus prefers a soil pH of 6.5-7.5, and will not do well if the pH is less than 6.0. Research has shown that asparagus will grow at lower pHs, but the lower pHs are more conducive to the growth of Fusarium fungi. Fusarium Root rot is known to kill asparagus plants. Asparagus prefers a sandy soil, but you can grow it if you raise the organic matter in the soil before planting. You can use compost to do that.

Asparagus can be transplanted after the soil has warmed up to about 50 degrees F. There is no advantage to planting the crowns in cold, wet soils. They will not grow until the soil warms and there is danger of the plants being more susceptible to Fusarium crown rot if crowns are exposed to cold, wet soils over prolonged periods. Plant the asparagus at either the west or north side of the garden so that it will not shade the other vegetables and will not be injured when the rest of the garden is tilled.

Dig a furrow no deeper than 5 to 6 inches. Apply a super phosphate fertilizer in the furrow before planting. Put the crowns into the furrow on top of the fertilizer, spacing the crowns 1-1/2 feet apart in the row. After planting, back fill the furrow to its original soil level. Do not compact the soil over the newly filled furrow or the emergence of the asparagus will be severely reduced. Spears should emerge within one week in moist soils. Do not harvest the asparagus during the transplanting year. As the spears elongate and reach a height of about 8 to 9 inches, the tips will open. The spear will become woody to support the small branchlets that become ferns. The ferns produce food for the plant and then move it down to the crown for next year's spear production. Anything that a gardener can do to keep healthy,

green fern throughout the post-harvest growing season will increase yield and quality the next season. Ferns should never be pruned or cut back.

Do not use salt as a weed killer. It does not harm the asparagus, but it inhibits water penetration in the soil. Also, rains can leach the salt out of the asparagus bed and into the rest of the garden, injuring other vegetables that are less salt tolerant than asparagus. Applying excessive amounts of salt has a few side effects. On clay soil it could result in the complete loss of soil structure causing the soil to take on a concrete-like consistency.

Contrary to popular belief, white asparagus is not a variety. It is simply asparagus spears grown in the absence of sunlight so that chlorophyll does not develop. White asparagus does have a slightly sweeter taste and has less fiber than green asparagus.

Purple asparagus is a variety, or rather a couple of varieties. Purple Passion, Pacific Purple and others are mutant strains bred to be purple in color, although the asparagus turns green when it is cooked.

In 2004, the top four asparagus producers were China, Peru, the U.S. and Mexico. In the U.S., California leads the states in asparagus production followed by Washington, Michigan, Illinois and New Jersey.

Asparagus is one of the more nutritionally valuable vegetables. It is the best vegetable provider of folic acid. It is low in calories, contains no fat or cholesterol, and is very low in sodium. It is a great source of potassium, fiber and rutin, a compound that strengthens the walls of capillaries.

When buying asparagus, look for asparagus with thicker spears; they will be tenderer than the thinner ones. At home, store fresh asparagus in the coldest part of your refrigerator with the base of the spears wrapped in a damp paper towel. It's best to eat asparagus the day you buy it, but it will keep for four or five days if refrigerated.

Summer Agriculture Institute Registration Now Open

The Ramada Inn and Conference Center in Morgantown will be the location for the 2009 Summer Agriculture Institute, on June 18 & 19. The Institute, sponsored by the West Virginia Farm Bureau Foundation, WVU Extension Service, and WVU Davis College of Agriculture, Forestry and Consumer Sciences, gives teachers the opportunity to receive teaching materials and practical, hands-on applications for their classrooms; learn about nutrition, technology, and careers in agriculture; and earn graduate or professional credits.

Teachers who have attended past Institutes are encouraged to reapply, as most content is new for 2009. The registration deadline for the popular seminar is June 1. Many county Farm Bureaus are offering scholarships to cover or help defray the cost. Interested teachers should contact the West Virginia Farm Bureau at 800-398-4630 x. 306 for more information on scholarships.

Graduate and professional credits are available through WVU for an additional fee. Scholarships do not cover the fees for WVU credits.

For a registration form and brochure, visit the West Virginia Farm Bureau website at www.wvfarm.org Follow the links from the above mentioned website or see WVU's site at www.caf.wvu.edu/resm/ae/aic/ for information on credits.

Representing more than 19,000 members, the West Virginia Farm Bureau was founded in 1919 to provide leadership, education, information, training and economic services to county farm bureaus to enhance the quality of life for its membership.

Berkeley County Youth Fair Dates to remember

- Friday, May 15, 2009 - Market Sheep and Market Goat check in from 6:00 to 8:00 pm
- Saturday, May 16, 2009 Market Hog and Rabbit Check in from 9 am - 12 noon.
- Poultry Blood Testing - Saturday, July 18, 2009 from 9:00 am to 11:00 am.
- 62nd Annual Berkeley County Youth Fair dates are August 3 - 8, 2009

Farmers Needed to Participate in the West Virginia Farmers' Market Nutrition Program

The West Virginia Farmers' Market Nutrition Program (WVFMNP) will authorize farmers' to participate in the 2009 FMNP. All farmers participating in WVFMNP must be a bona fide farmer and must sell at an authorized farmers' market or farmstand, or be a local farmer cooperative. In order for a farmer to be legally authorized to participate in the WVFMNP, the following must be met:

- a) Must be a bona fide farmer, meaning an individual authorized to sell eligible produce at participating farmers' markets or farmstands. The term farmer shall mean producer as termed A person or organization that grows or manufactures goods or services for sale.
- b) Must be a bona fide farmstand, meaning the structure should not be movable and is used primarily for the sale of fresh, locally grown fruits and vegetables (Vehicles, wagons, carts, trailers, or other wheeled equipment are not acceptable)
- c) Local Farmer Cooperative is individuals who exclusively sell produce from the local farmers and take the vouchers only for those products which are West Virginia grown from the local farmers. A list of those farmers whom you purchase from must be included on the Farmer Application.
- d) Farmer that is selling honey must have their colonies registered with the State and/or list the name of the apiarist they are buying honey from. Product labeling must have been approved through the WV Department of Agriculture and meet all Consumer Labeling Requirements.
- e) Farmer must submit a completed WVFMNP Application and Agreement to the WVFMNP office. All trainings must be completed by June 26 and paperwork received in Charleston by July 10, 2009. Failure to do so will result in farmer being unable to participate in the 2009 WVFMNP Program. All questions on the Application must be completed or the form will be returned.
- f) Each Application will be screened by the WVFMNP office.

At least twenty-five (25%) of the produce sold by farmers, must be grown by the farmer, the remainder must be locally grown by a local producer. Locally grown means grown in West Virginia or in the adjacent county to West Virginia's border in a neighboring state. Locally grown is fifty miles (50). If your market organization designates different regulation and you are a member of that organization you must follow their regulations as long as they are in compliance with our WVFMNP Rules and Procedures. The program begins July 1, 2009 and goes through October 31, 2009. This program is funded through The United States Department of Agriculture and the State of West Virginia.

Local farmers needing training to participate in the 2009 WVFMNP can call Mary Beth Bennett in the Berkeley County Extension Office telephone (304) 264-1936 before Wednesday, June 17th to be trained. Applications for the WVFMNP are available through local Extension Offices if the agents have been trained to conduct the program. More information on this program is available on request by contacting the number listed above.

Garden Tips

- Fertilize houseplants
- Transplant or seed melons
- Plant sweet potatoes
- Plant large pumpkins, pepper and cabbage
- Harvest established asparagus
- Plant okra
- Seed lima beans

Until next time ...Happy Gardening and Farming!