

“CMG Vegetable of the Week”

Asparagus by Cliff Winter

(*asparagus officinalis*)

Family: Asparagaceae

Variety: Martha Washington



Photo by Cliff Winter

If you are not in a big hurry, asparagus is an easy vegetable to grow. Asparagus is a perennial vegetable that will live from 12 to 15 years or longer in zones 2-9. It may take two to three years for a sizable crop, but it is worth the wait. The easiest way to start your asparagus bed is by planting one-year old crowns. They should be purchased from a reputable supplier. Plant in early spring, in a sunny location of your garden. Choose an area that you can forfeit for a few years. Soil should be a deep sandy loam with good drainage. A pH level of 6.0-6.7 is ideal. Plant crowns 5-6 inches deep, 18 inches apart. If planting in rows, have them 4-5 feet apart. This allows the plant to spread over the years. Also keep in mind that as the asparagus grows out, it grows tall and may shade neighboring plants, so plan accordingly. I have a devoted three by three-foot raised bed for my asparagus. Though it may be difficult not harvesting your first season, let the plant grow out till frost then cut back, leaving about two inches of stub. For wintering over, cover the bed with 4-6 inches of compost and wait for the coming spring. In the second or third season, your bed will start producing a harvestable stalk. For the first harvest, take the spears from only the first three to five weeks. After that, let it grow, allowing time for crowns to develop more and to store food reserves. After the third season, you may harvest 8-10 weeks. Harvesting is as simple as snapping off the stalk just below soil level when it reaches a height of 6 to 8 inches tall, before the tips starts to separate. Check daily, if not enough spears are ready for your meal, refrigerate what you snapped off and place them in a glass of water to keep fresh with a plastic bag over the top. These stalks will keep till more are ready in your bed to add for a meal, a tip my mother taught me. In future years, your bed will increase yields.

Here are some history facts to help you in Master Gardener’s Trivia. Asparagus is native to the Eastern Mediterranean area. Cultivation of this veggie began 2000 years ago and is now grown in much of the world. In the time of King Louis XIV, asparagus was dubbed “The King of Vegetables”.

And now the best part, eating asparagus. There are many ways to prepare the spears: grilling, roasting, cream soups, or wrapped in BACON!! A simple way my family enjoys eating asparagus is to sauté the spears in a large pan using two tablespoons of butter, one tablespoon of olive oil, two cloves of garlic, half teaspoon of coarse salt, and pepper to taste. Melt butter in a skillet over medium-high heat. Stir in the olive oil, salt, and pepper. Cook garlic in butter for a minute, but do not brown. Add asparagus, and cook for 10 minutes, turning asparagus to ensure even cooking. Enjoy! Even my kids liked it!

References:

pubs.ext.vt.edu/426/426-401/426-401

world-foodhistory.com