

# Care Guidelines

## ASPARAGUS

[www.farwestlandscape.net](http://www.farwestlandscape.net)

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Asparagus is a perennial vegetable native to Western Europe on limestone soils. Asparagus is a member of the lily family and the Asparagus family includes many species prized for their ornamental values. This family varies from edible vegetables, decorative floral types and popular house plants. The common edible asparagus will last at least 20 years in the garden.

**Planting:** Asparagus prefers rich sandy well-drained loam soils. It's crucial to properly prepare the site prior to planting so that there will be a good depth of rich, fertile, well-drained soil. Boise's commonly found clay soils should be excavated to a depth of 2 feet. Drainage should be encouraged by putting in stone, broken brick, or modern perforated plastic tile along with the addition of organic matter in the subsoil. Spade compost and peat into the bottom of the trench. The soil that has been dug from the trench should now be prepared by spading organic matter into it along with at least 4 ounces or more of Bone Meal per square yard. Bone meal contains phosphorus. It is important to add phosphorus. Spread a 0-20-0, or even a 0-40-0, fertilizer liberally in the bottom of the trench or furrow. It is important to point out that the organic bed should be prepared in the Fall of the year to allow the organic matter to compost thoroughly prior to planting the asparagus roots in the spring (late February through early April). This foresight and patience on the part of the gardener can mean the difference between success and failure. Asparagus roots are soft and starchy, rather than woody, and can easily compost if planted with rotting manure, etc. If you have clay soil and wish to plant in the Spring, use only composted organic material in the preparation of your beds. Spring planting is recommended for asparagus roots. In clay soils that have been properly prepared, plant the crowns at soil level or just 1"-2" below and cover with 2" of soil. In the fall, cover with 2 more inches of soil. Asparagus crowns migrate to the surface of the soil over time because the new crown grows on top of last year's crown every year. Asparagus beds should be maintained so 3"-5" of soil covers the crowns. Crowns that are cultured too shallow yield spindly spears. Crowns that are cultured too deep tend to grow to the surface more rapidly, and yield of the early crops are adversely affected. For maximum yield it, is important to properly orient the crowns when planting with the crown on top and the roots or "legs" spread in a downward direction. This is most easily achieved by forming a ridge of soil placed in the center of the trench or individual pyramids of soil placed in the center of the trench so the crowns can be properly "perched" on the ridge or pyramids prior to covering with soil. Never allow two plants to touch in the planting trench. A spacing of 15"-18" is about right. Again, if incorporating organic matter, be sure and do so far enough ahead of time so composting does not occur at the time of planting. Once established, asparagus is easy to care for.

**Harvesting:** Don't harvest spears the first year. The second season, you can harvest for 2-3 weeks or until the spears develop ferny stalks. This practice encourages the roots to store food for the next year's growth. In the fall when the top (fern) growth browns, cut off all fern growth at the ground level and dispose of it. Harvesting the 3rd year and there after can last from 8-12 weeks. Just snap the spear off near the ground. If the spear bends rather than snaps, it will be tough. If they snap off easily, they will be tender. Pick a large batch of spears and steam them in a steamer cooker. After 2-3 minutes, the asparagus is "blanched" and a portion can be taken out of the steamer and frozen for later use. Asparagus is normally fully cooked in 12-18 minutes in a steamer. *Picking asparagus in the late part of the day* yields more tender spears than picking in the morning. Asparagus grows fast during the warm hours of the day, and it tends to be really tender in the evening!

**Continued Care:** Fertilize annually when harvest has been completed and the plants begin to fern out. Apply compost and 8-10 pounds of a complete fertilizer (5-10-10 or 1-10-5) per 100 feet of row. Most irrigation should be done during the "fern season," not the harvest season. Control weeds by hoeing; avoid wounding the plant or the soon-to-emerge spears. The asparagus beetle and the spotted asparagus beetle can cause widespread damage. The adult asparagus beetle is 1/4 inch long, metallic blue-black with orange to yellow markings. It feeds on spears and berries. Its gray larvae feed on the berries. The spotted asparagus beetle is brick red with black spots. It feeds on both spears and ferns. Its larvae feed on the berries. The 12 spot bean beetle also feeds on the fern during the larval stage. The bean beetle looks much like a ladybug beetle, only the bean beetle is yellow with black spots. Damage often begins in May. When using a pesticide, carefully follow all directions and related information on the container.