

Asparagus

Asparagus *Asparagus officinalis* is easy to grow in Central Texas. The plants can get 4 – 5 feet tall and are perennial, so choose a location where you can enjoy these beautiful, ferny plants for 15 – 25 years! You'll have to wait 3 years, however, before your first full harvest.

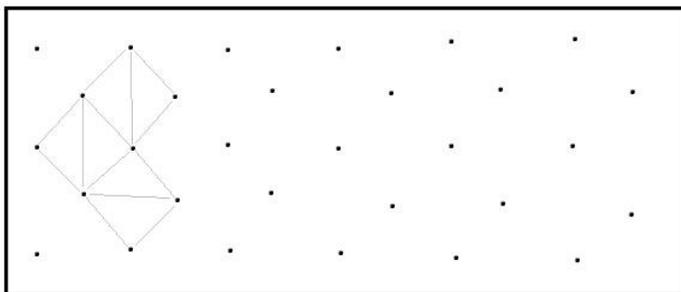


Diagram #1 – Stagger the spacing in each row to maximize coverage.

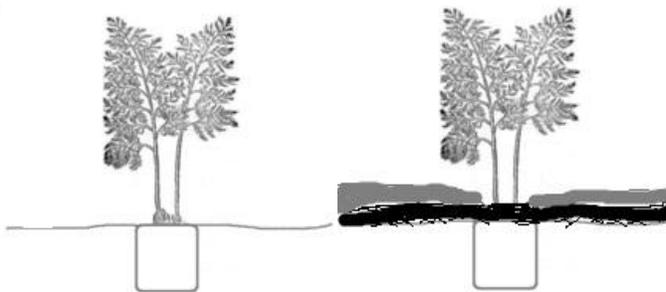


Diagram #2a – Match the level of the soil in the pot with the soil in the bed.

Diagram #2b – Topdress and cover crown with compost. Then top with mulch that does not cover the crown.

Soil Prep and Planting - Asparagus needs a deep bed of loose, well-drained soil. The bed should be 3 – 4' wide and at least 10" – 12" deep. Choose a location in full sun. To prepare existing soil for asparagus, mix in one of our **high quality composts**, creating a blend of 50% compost and 50% soil. At the same time, mix in a **higher-phosphorus dry fertilizer** to promote root growth and a **mineral supplement**. If you have shallow soil or poor drainage, make a raised bed for your asparagus. Use a quality prepared **Garden soil**, and add all of the amendments listed above except for the compost. Plant transplants at the current soil level of the bed and mulch around them without covering or burying the crown. Evenly space transplants to about 1 per sq. ft. throughout the bed. Water deeply and frequently throughout the growing season, allowing only about the top inch of soil to dry.

If creating a deep bed is not practical for your location, don't panic. According to recent research, total yield is unaffected by asparagus planting depth; however, deeper plantings produced larger spears, but fewer of them. Shallow plantings send up shoots earlier in spring, thus are subjected to possible frost damage.

Maintenance - In the fall, after the first freeze has browned out the fronds, cut them back to the ground. With the fronds gone, use this as an opportunity to remove weeds from your asparagus bed. After removing the fronds, top the entire bed with a **high quality compost** to cover the crowns completely. If we do not get a killing frost, go ahead and cut back the fronds in winter and cover the crowns with compost. Rake off any mulch and apply a single application of a **high nitrogen organic fertilizer** between late January and early March. Reapply the mulch.

The Asparagus Beetle (*Crioceris asparagi*) is the most prevalent pest in an asparagus bed. Adults and larvae chew on shoots and foliage. Eggs are laid on shoots around the time of harvest. Presence of eggs on the spears is objectionable to some and may impact marketability, although the eggs themselves cause no damage.

Control of the asparagus beetle is relatively simple. *Thoroughly remove all plant debris from garden and surrounding areas after harvest to eliminate beetle overwintering sites.* Avoid using pesticides as it will impact important natural enemies of asparagus beetles such as the tiny parasitic wasp, *Tetrastichus asparagi*, which attacks eggs, and several species of lady beetles (which feed on asparagus beetle eggs and small larvae). Beneficial nematodes applied to the soil after removing the dead fronds can help reduce the number of larvae for the next season.

Harvest - Resist the temptation to harvest shoots the first year, and only take a few the second year. The unharvested asparagus spears grow into leaves, which produce the energy for the plant to develop a strong root system. The third year, harvest the spears when they are 4 to 10 inches long. To harvest, cut or snap off spears at ground level; do not leave a stub. Be sure the cutting tool is clean. In an active, healthy bed, you will need to harvest at least every other day, as young shoots grow quickly. *If a freeze is expected, harvest all the spears visible – even tiny ones. They won't survive a hard freeze.* When the spear diameter becomes less than 3/8 inch (smaller than the diameter of a pencil), or when the heat of the season causes the spears to start opening up, it's time to stop harvesting. *In a well-established bed, the harvest season may last 8 weeks.*

Asparagus loses quality very fast after harvesting, so eat them up soon! Like corn, asparagus loses its sugar content and becomes more fibrous the older it gets. The spears may be kept for up to 3 weeks in the refrigerator. Cut ½ inch off of the bottom of the stem and store upright in a container with an inch of water in it. Another storage option is to blanch the spears for 3 to 5 minutes, and freeze them in an airtight package.

When the harvest is over, let your Asparagus spears grow. They will grow into tall, lacy fronds that can make an attractive border. If you have your bed in a high wind area, you can use stakes and string or fencing wire to create support to contain the fronds and prevent them from breaking.

Here's wishing you decades of great asparagus harvests!

Asparagus Varieties for Central Texas (Chilling hours).

Conover's Colossal – 1870's American heirloom that has great production with thick flavorful stalks.

Mary Washington – Emerald spears averaging 10" are tightly budded and hold over an extra long cutting period.

Precoce d'Argenteuil – 1860 French heirloom also known as Dutch Purple. This variety produces thick rose-purple spears that are tender and tasty.

U.C. 72 – Great all around disease resistant variety. U.C. 72 is a heavy yielding variety with large spears.