

955 Benton Ave., Winslow, ME 04901 • Phone: 1-877-564-6697 • Fax: 1-800-738-6314
Email: service@johnnyseeds.com • Web Site: Johnnyseeds.com

ASPARAGUS (*Asparagus officinalis*)

You have received hardy, one-year-old asparagus crowns. Plant them as soon as possible for the best results. If you cannot plant immediately, remove any elastics or ties and gently loosen the crowns, cover them with damp sphagnum moss or newspaper, and store them in a cool location out of direct sunlight (such as a refrigerator). Do not expose the crowns to the drying sun or wind.

Asparagus is a long-lived perennial that has been cultivated for thousands of years. The young spears, before they have turned woody, are the only portions of asparagus that are edible. Any small, red berries that develop on the foliage later in the season should be avoided, as they are poisonous to humans. A properly selected and planted site will produce for 15 years or more.

SITE AND SOIL PREPARATION:

Establishment practices are very important for successful production. Errors made at planting are not easily corrected after planting and can reduce yields. A soil test to indicate pH and nutrient levels should be taken the fall prior to planting. Asparagus prefers a sunny location free of perennial weeds, and will not survive in poorly drained soils or fields with standing water. Sandy loam soils are preferable for commercial production. In early spring prior to planting, apply compost, aged manure, or complete fertilizer, and work well into the soil to a depth of 12 inches. Asparagus will not perform well in acidic soils. Add lime if necessary to raise the soil pH to 7.0.

PLANTING:

Crowns can be planted out 3–4 weeks prior to the average last frost date. Depth of planting is critical: if planted too shallow, asparagus will produce a large number of small spears; and if planted too deep, the spears will be large but few in number. Place asparagus crowns in a furrow 5–8 inches deep and 12 inches wide. Shallower planting may be beneficial in heavier soils to prevent the crowns from becoming waterlogged, while deeper planting can be done in sandy soils.

With the buds upright and the roots splayed apart as best as you can, space crowns 8–14 inches apart in the row, with 3–6 feet between rows. Certain varieties have specific spacing requirements, so be sure to reference the descriptions in the catalog or on our website for exact details.



Crowns laid out in planting trench, ready to be covered with initial soil layer.

Cover crowns with 2–3 inches of soil at planting, and water until the soil is damp. As the shoots appear above the soil, gradually back-fill the furrow, ensuring that the tips of the shoots are not completely covered. Progressively fill the trench every couple of weeks by back-filling 3–4 times during the first year.



Back-filling planting trench.

Asparagus beds require consistent soil moisture during their first season after planting. Water stress can delay establishment or result in crown death.

PERENNIAL MAINTENANCE:

Be sure to keep the asparagus bed weed-free. A mulch of hay, straw, or leaves should be applied after the planting trench has been completely back-filled to regulate moisture and suppress weeds. Shallow tillage ($\frac{1}{2}$ –1 inch deep) in early spring or after harvest will help to control any over-wintering weeds. Be sure to use caution when cultivating, as damage to the crowns can open the plant to soil-borne diseases. Asparagus is a heavy feeder and should be fertilized regularly to maintain productivity. Each fall or early spring after establishment, add compost or aged manure to the beds. Soil testing is recommended every 2–3 years to monitor the pH, and maintain at 7.0.

PEST MANAGEMENT:

Most insect pests can be controlled with good sanitation and cultural practices. Asparagus beetles overwinter in crop debris within the bed and surrounding areas. Removal of this debris will help to reduce populations. Wait until the foliage senesces (naturally deteriorates) in the fall prior to trimming it to ground level. Scout for insect pests regularly. If populations increase to damaging levels, pyrethrin or spinosad should control asparagus beetles, aphids, and cutworms.

HARVEST:

One year after planting, you can harvest from your asparagus bed in the spring for a 7–10 day period. The 2nd year after planting the bed may be harvested for 2–3 weeks. In the 3rd and subsequent years a normal harvest of 6 weeks is possible. Spears are considered marketable when they reach 7 inches in length and are pencil-size in diameter. Harvest by bending the tender shoots over until they snap, or cut with a knife at or just below soil level. If using a harvest knife, do so with care to avoid damaging developing spears that are just below the soil surface. Harvest all spears including damaged, thin, and spindly ones. Allowing cull spears to fern out during harvest will delay spear production, and offer insect pests host sites to build up populations. Store at 36°F/2.2°C and 95–100% relative humidity for up to 2 weeks.