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News Release

Real asparagus lovers grow their own

Question: Can I grow asparagus in this area?

Answer: The short answer is yes, but it is not the easiest crop to grow. Asparagus is a perennial crop that can last for many years if managed correctly. Since it has the potential to last a very long time it pays to spend time and effort in creating a good environment for growth. First and foremost, choose a sunny area with very well drained soil. If your soil is heavy clay or otherwise poorly drained you will need to grow asparagus in a raised bed at least 12” high; and 18” would not be too high. Good soil and proper bed preparation are critical because of the extensive root system which is necessary to produce enough energy to have edible spears for several weeks and keep the plant healthy enough to overwinter and repeat the process each spring.

An important fact about asparagus is that they are dioecious which means they make both male and female plants. The newer “all male” hybrid cultivars are much more productive than the old standard cultivars such as Martha or Mary Washington because they don’t waste energy producing seeds. Many of the newer cultivars have the added advantage of being resistant to disease. The North Alabama Horticulture Research Station has been looking at several cultivars for the last few years. The superintendent, Arnold Caylor, likes several cultivars developed at Rutgers University: Jersey Knight, Jersey Giant, Jersey Supreme, Jersey Deluxe and Jersey King. All of these are male hybrids with both good yields and disease resistance. If you want something a little out of the ordinary you might try Purple Passion which, as the name implies, produces purple spears. Mr. Caylor says, “The purple speared cultivars don’t yield as well but might add a little color as an edible landscape crop in a perennial bed.”

You may plant asparagus from “crowns” this month or you may start your own seed now and transplant the new seedlings in April or May. The cheapest way to start is by growing seedlings; you are much less likely to introduce a serious crown/root disease that may hitch a ride on the crowns purchased. I suggest you spend the next few weeks preparing the planting bed by adding lime to adjust the soil pH if needed. Asparagus need a relatively high pH of around 6.5 and they need that pH for a foot deep because of their extensive root systems. Your best chance to adjust the pH to a deep level is before planting. Once planted you don’t need to dig around the plants very much or you risk damaging the rhizomes and roots. Have your soil tested and follow the instructions by adding the needed lime and the phosphorus prior to planting. The other nutrients (nitrogen and potassium) can be added after planting as directed.

When transplanting either crowns or seedlings, dig a 6 to 8-inch trench and place the crown or plant in the bottom. As the plant grows, gradually fill in around the developing plant without totally covering the leaves. The reason for this is to encourage deep root development and an expansive rhizome from which the asparagus spears will emerge in the future. The first year the goal is to develop a good plant and expansive rhizome and the next year you may harvest spears for 2 or 3 weeks; and in subsequent years the harvest season can be doubled. Auburn University research has shown yields of around 30 pounds for a hundred foot bed over the entire season. If you are a real asparagus lover you will probably need 50 or 100 feet of bed length to provide a family of four with an ample supply of fresh spears. However, if you just need enough for an occasional meal you can get by with a much smaller bed.

Asparagus is very frost tender so have a blanket handy if freezing temperatures are expected during spring harvest time. The rest of the year cold temperatures are not a big concern. Don't harvest for too long in the spring or the plants will not recover well for the next crop. Once you stop harvesting, the spears develop into large fern like plants that will grow all summer to supply the crowns and rhizomes with energy to make another crop. Pay special attention to weed control during the spring and summer. Hand weeding and mulching are your best options. Once the cold in the winter kills the foliage you may cut the plant back to the ground.

You should fertilize the plants two times each year. The first application should be made just prior to or just as the first spears emerge – usually in March and a second application should be made just after harvest about 6 or 8 weeks later.

Once you have tasted fresh asparagus right out of the garden canned, frozen or week old asparagus from the grocery store just doesn't measure up. For more information on soil testing visit the Extension System website at www.aces.edu/soiltest or for more information on this topic or other horticulture related questions, please contact Regional Extension Agent Tony Glover at the St. Clair County Extension office at (205) 338-9416 or email gloveta@aces.edu.

