

ASPARAGUS

By Mike Mason

I love perennial vegetables. Once they are established one no longer has the worry over germination one does with seeds sown in spring. Perennial vegetables have deep root systems which enable them to thrive through droughts with no watering. Usually they grow so vigorously that they swamp the weeds, so there is a very much reduced need to weed. They usually have a long period of cropping. And, most importantly, they taste good. Let us turn to that great favourite, asparagus.

I have been growing asparagus since 1967. Initially I purchased young plants from Le Blevenec, the most famous grower in France, and I obtained their most popular variety, Asperge d'Argenteuil. They grew well in my garden and we had plenty of asparagus. After 3 years we had to move so I dug up the now enormous roots and took them with me. Luckily we moved in January when the plants were dormant; they all survived the move and gave lots of asparagus in their new location. Then, disaster. We moved again after 2 ½ years, this time to Naphill, again I transplanted them but this time in August and they all died.

I then tried again, purchasing new plants from several growers and trying several types of asparagus. They all failed, so for quite a few years we had no asparagus from my allotment at Walter's Ash. In desperation, in 1987, I went back to my first love and purchased asparagus seed of the variety Asperge d'Argenteuil. The plants gave their first crop 3 years later and we still pick about a kilo of delicious asparagus every 3 days from the end of March to the end of June. I usually bring on the crop by covering the bed with fleece from the end of February.

How does one raise asparagus plants from seed? I sowed mine in a standard seed tray in ordinary compost in the airing cupboard in February. The seed are quite large, about 2 mm in diameter, so are easy to handle and space out in the seed tray. There were about 100 in the packet and I had nearly 100% germination. As soon as the first ones had germinated I placed the covered seed tray on a sunny windowsill to allow them to grow on. In mid April I planted them in the garden after hardening them off. I planted them about 3 inches apart in rows 6 inches apart and they grew vigorously. I left them there for nearly a year.

I then prepared the asparagus bed on the allotment. I chose to have 2 rows 4 feet apart in soil free of perennial weeds and reasonably stone-free, each row being about 37 feet long. For each row I took out a trench a spades' depth and width then returned most of the soil (with added compost) to form a ridge in the trench about 3 inches from the top of the trench. The purpose of the ridge is to allow the asparagus roots to start their new life on the allotment pointing downwards at an angle of about 45°. Then came the most important moment. I dug up the plants in the garden, put them in a bucket of water and took them to the allotment. One must not let them dry out. I then placed them on the ridge in the trench about 15 inches apart, watered them and immediately covered them up, restoring the soil to its original level.

I then let the asparagus plants grow on for another two years without cropping, allowing them to build up their strength. Frequent weeding was essential to remove the competition. Since the roots are near the surface one cannot dig deeply so I chose to smother the bed with well-rotted farmyard manure to diminish the weed problem and to feed the asparagus. I cropped from the third year and found it advantageous to use an asparagus knife to reduce the possibility of unwittingly damaging new shoots just emerging from the crown. An asparagus knife has a handle with a blade about 15 inches long, the final 4 inches being curved and serrated on the inside of the curve. One simply slides the back of the knife into the soil down the side of the asparagus spear about 4 inches to touch the crown (a point of resistance). Then one turns the serrated side to the base of the spear and saws the spear through.

Asparagus grows very quickly, about 3 inches per day, and even faster in very warm weather. One ceases cropping at the end of June to allow the spears to grow on to their final height of about 4 feet and the whole bed becomes a mass of fern. The plants continue to grow until the frosts of November, putting back into the roots the energy they will need the following spring to produce the next crop. Asparagus is believed to grow well in all soil types. I have grown asparagus in sandy soil and in heavy loam.

Asparagus has two pests, slugs and the asparagus beetle. Slugs eat a part of the spear as it emerges from the soil and the spear bends over towards the damage. I put slug pellets down the row when the first spears emerge and that stops that problem (the asparagus bed is covered with fleece at that stage). Asparagus beetles are about 3 mm long and eat the green foliage and stalks. They can kill the plant if one has an extremely serious attack. Derris dust, a natural organic insecticide, stops that problem. Asparagus beetles may have natural predators. I have noticed that if a plant has several beetles on it they have disappeared a few weeks later when I have left the plant alone. The asparagus beetles also sometimes lay their eggs on the emerging spears and one has to wipe them off when cropping. The eggs are black, about 1 mm long, very thin and protrude sideways from the spear.

The asparagus spears should preferably be cooked immediately they are picked to retain their fantastic taste, delicate softness and freshness. Just as sweetcorn must be cooked within one hour of picking (the sugar turns to starch after an hour) I believe that the taste of asparagus suffers if not cooked within an hour. There is no way one can experience that superb taste with shop-bought asparagus. As for preparation, the base of the spear is lightly scraped, any woody part removed, then the spears are washed and steamed. They should preferably be steamed in an asparagus pan. This is a very tall saucepan which allows the spears to be cooked with their tips well away from the boiling water which would otherwise remove a lot of the taste. Then serve them on a hot plate with butter on their own. Delicious! Restaurants just can't compete!

I was once told that the life of an asparagus bed was 20 years, but the current seed packets state 10 years. A few years ago I noticed several gaps appearing in my rows, so I started off a couple of replacement rows alongside. The replacement plants are now producing their crops but the old plants have not died off! So I filled in the gaps in the old rows and now have 4 rows of asparagus, each 37 feet long, covering an area 16 feet wide. People must think I am mad about asparagus. I am!

MIKE MASON