

MESSENGER-INQUIRER



February 17, 2024

Growing Rhubarb and Asparagus in the Garden

Rhubarb and asparagus are easy perennial vegetables to grow in the backyard. These early spring perennial vegetables take a couple of years to become established and ready for harvest.

Plant rhubarb and asparagus along the edge of the garden where they can remain undisturbed. The site needs well-drained soil in full sun. An asparagus bed may last for 20 years.

Test the soil in the selected site through the Daviess County Cooperative Extension Service or your local office to determine if lime is required and the amount of phosphorus and potassium needed before planting. By testing the soil, you may find additional lime or nutrients are not needed which saves money. For rhubarb, the pH range is 6 to 6.8. Asparagus prefers a tighter pH range of 6.5 to 6.8. It does not tolerate acidic soil.

To prepare the soil for planting in early spring, incorporate organic matter such as compost into the soil to a depth of 8 to 12 inches in the area for planting. Organic matter improves the soil's physical condition and makes a better growing environment.

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Rhubarb is started by planting pieces of the storage root cut from the crown which contains a bud. Start with disease-free pieces to avoid a disease called crown rot.

Rhubarb is established with pieces of the crown and planted 3 feet apart within the row from March to early April. Allow 4 to 5 feet between rows. Soil should be placed 2 to 3 inches on top of the crown. Soon after the ground is frozen in the fall, cover the plants with straw. Remove the straw in early spring, so that new growth can start.

Let rhubarb grow for one year and harvest stalks for a short period during the second year after planting. Beginning in the spring of the third growing season, a full harvest of eight to ten weeks can take place. Pull stalks from the crown instead of cutting them. Cut off the leaves and use only the stalks. The leaves should not be eaten due to a large amount of oxalic acid contained in them which is a toxic and potentially deadly poison.

Asparagus consists of a crown which is a combination of buds, fleshy and fibrous roots, and rhizomes. Rhizomes are underground stems with buds. The fleshy roots store food reserves that develop tender shoots the next spring.

It is recommended to start with one-year-old asparagus crowns instead of seeds. Two- or three-year-old plants are sometimes available, but they may have been overcrowded at the nursery and are more susceptible to damage when transplanted.

Dormant asparagus crowns are planted in a trench 12 to 15 inches wide and 6 to 8 inches deep in March to early April. Plant at the shallower depth if the soil is heavy. Space plants 15 to 18 inches apart within the row and 30 inches between rows.

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To plant a crown, make sure the growing point, which looks like a small stem with a point on the end, is facing upward. Place the bottom of the crown on a small mound of soil in the trench making sure it is higher than the roots. Spread the roots out and cover the crown with 2 to 3 inches of soil. As shoots begin to grow, continue to put soil around and over the crown. Repeat this procedure as the plant grows until the trench is filled.

Mulch around the asparagus plants with 3 inches of mulch, such as weed-free straw, to control weeds. The mulch keeps the soil cool and delays the emergence of spears in the spring to avoid late spring frosts.

Asparagus shoots or spears are not harvested the first year after crowns are planted. Shoots are left to supply food to the root system.

During the second year after planting, limit the harvest period to three to four weeks. Then let the shoots grow. The third year after planting, harvesting can continue for eight to ten weeks. The harvest may end earlier if numerous spears, pencil-sized or smaller, are produced. Allow shoots to grow all summer to transfer food to the roots.

When harvesting asparagus spears, break them off at soil level instead of cutting below the soil surface. Cutting can easily injure the crown buds which produce the next spears. If you use a knife, be careful. Morning is the best time to harvest asparagus spears because they will snap easier. The spears should be harvested daily when they are 5 to 7 inches tall. They should be used or refrigerated immediately to keep their quality.

Stop harvesting asparagus when three-fourths of the spears are the diameter of a pencil. These should be left to produce and transfer food to the roots during the summer.

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The tops should be removed in the fall after they have died from a killing frost.

Removing the tops helps decrease potential disease problems.

For more information about growing and maintaining rhubarb and asparagus, call the Daviess County Cooperative Extension Service at 270-685-8480 or email annette.heisdorffer@uky.edu.

Annette's Tip:

When looking to purchase asparagus, the University of Kentucky recommends the cultivars Jersey Knight, Jersey King, Jersey Supreme, Jersey Giant, and Jersey Prince because they have disease resistance against the fungus called rust. Recommended rhubarb varieties are Valentine, Canada Red, and MacDonald.

Upcoming Event:

“Preparing the Vegetable Garden for Success” will be presented on February 21 at 2:00 p.m. at the Daviess County Public Library. Opening of Seed Library will follow.

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