

Asparagus

It seems that most people like to eat Asparagus, and have planted some crowns in their gardens and have had mixed results.

With Asparagus plants starting to die off now, it is a good time to discuss their needs so that they can grow you a good crop of spears next spring and summer.

Asparagus plants are greedy deep rooted plants that originally grew beside the ocean. To do any good with them, you have to mound up lots of food, so that the worms and rain through the winter can wash and pull it down to the crowns.

At the moment you probably have some dead stems, some yellowing stems and some green ones. Wait 'til they are mostly dead or yellow and soft. If they won't pull out of the bed easily cut them off just below the surface of the soil.

Next you have to feed them for the next crop. So: prepare them like you do your regular garden, minerals, bentonite, some dolomite or lime and your usual fertiliser. Scratch it all in *Don't dig*, and give it a watering can full of molasses and bacteria. (Go Go juice)

It is then time to add the salt! Yep, I said Salt. They came from the seaside remember!

Don't put too much on, about a rounded tablespoon full per square metre. 'Then, me hearties', on with the manure. Use composted or aged chook, cow or sheep, even 'Alpaca poo will doo,' If you are using other than chook, you will need to add more nitrogen in the form of either Blood and Bone or Multigrow (composted chook pellets.)

With the manure, you will need to add it to about 100mm thick. If it is not chook, then spread one of the other nitrogen inputs suggested, on the bed, before you add the manure. You will need to spread a big double handful of either one of them to a square metre of garden.

Do not dig in! Give your garden a good watering then allow the rain and worms to do the rest, just cover the lot with straw or mulch and leave it. You will see the results poking through next spring. Give your asparagus this attention as soon as they are ready, don't leave them until later 'cause they start shooting as soon as they detect a change in the weather cycle. Then you'll know that you've blown it, 'cause you will have 'drinking straws' to eat.

Planting them

Asparagus officinalis, - in Greek, Asparagus means first sprout. In Latin officinalis means "the apothecary shop".

Asparagus is a native of the riverbanks of southern Europe and Russia. The Romans cultivated it and so did the Greeks, who used it as a medicinal plant. Medicinally it is used to stimulate lazy intestines; it increases the flow of urine and perspiration and increases cell production in the kidneys. If you have 'crook' kidneys don't eat it, also people with rheumatoid arthritis shouldn't either.

Asparagus are probably best grown in a raised bed or similar. They need a light alkaline soil, not too much clay. A pH from 6.5 to 7.5 will do. As they need about 20cm of soil over them, a raised bed of at least 30cm or more is recommended. If you can get 30cm above them, that would be good, just add more layers.

Crowns are usually available in Autumn and Winter, and they have male and female crowns. It is said (not me) that the males bear more and bigger stalks, but you usually get what you can. The male plants have small creamy flowers and the female bears small red berries which can be grown to make more plants (take a long time to bear).

1. When you have your crowns, dig a trench of about 30cm deep. In the bottom 10cm put some soil (or Vegie mix) and manure mixed together for them to sit on.
2. Plant the crowns at about 25cm to 30cm spacings, or centres, if you are planting two or more rows. If you have a bigger bed then spread wider than that, but about 6 crowns will usually feed a family.
3. Make a little mound of soil for the crowns to sit on, so that their roots can spread down the sides. Cover the top of them with a layer of soil or v/mix to about 10cm deep, and firm down *gently*, sprinkle your minerals over this layer and water it down.
4. Add a 10cm deep layer of manure, and, on the top of this, put in all your usual fertiliser and other inputs as well. (as suggested previously) You can stir this in but not deeply, and water again.
5. If it fits, add another layer of soil or v/mix to the top (it will shrink down) and then cover with some straw or mulch. Don't forget to occasionally put another handful of fertilizer on the plot during summer and keep it well watered.
6. You have done your job, go and have a 'cuppa' and put your feet up. Let the rain and nature do the rest.
7. Don't cut your 'sparrow grass' for about two years, it needs that growing time to get properly established. When harvesting leave about 20% of uncut spears for the plant to survive and grow bigger and better crowns for next year. At about Xmas time let them all go to leaf, as you will kill them if you continue to cut all the time. You will want them to last you for twenty years at least.



This is a photo of an asparagus plot expanding its crowns during summer. It had to be trimmed, as it overflowed the pathway.

Enjoy the experience people.

Ralph D.

for MiT Down to Earth team.

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Multigrow and Blood and Bone, are available in bulk for good prices at The Farm shop, Elders or Landmark in Midland.