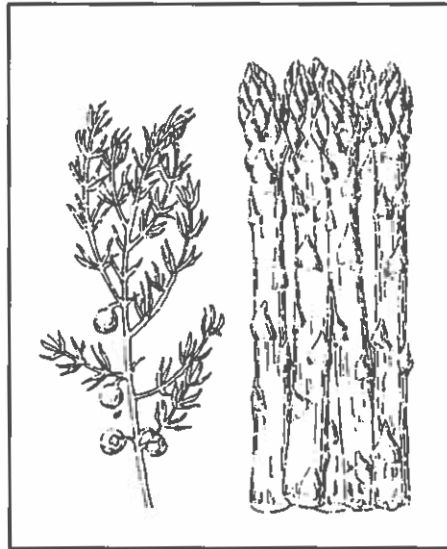


Asparagus



Introduction

Asparagus is a member of the Liliaceae (lily family) and has separate male and female plants. *Asparagus officinalis* is a perennial crop which is productive for fifteen years or more after establishment. It originated along the seacoasts of Europe and Asia and has been cultivated for over 2000 years.

Asparagus is adaptable to temperate regions where low temperature or drought give the crop a rest period. The minimum temperature for germination is 10°C. The optimum range for germination is 16-30°C. The optimum temperature for germination is 24°C. The crop does well under cool season conditions; however, the rate of growth is very temperature sensitive. The length of time required for the asparagus shoot to grow from 10cm to 25cm varies from 5.3 days at a mean daily temperature of 11°C to 1.9 days at a mean temperature of 25°C. Rhizome buds form at temperatures between 16 and 32°C. This plant requires a good water supply but will not tolerate wet soils. Asparagus is frost sensitive so areas subject to late spring and early fall frost, should be avoided if high yield is to be obtained. Dormant asparagus crowns are rarely harmed by winter cold.

The preferred soil is deep, reasonably free of stones and gravel, loose, a fine loamy sand to sandy loam with reasonable organic matter. Good drainage is essential. Heavy soils such as day loam should be avoided. A site should not have had asparagus production in the past. This crop requires a rooting depth greater than 1.5 M.

The first asparagus harvest occurs, in the spring of the third year from planting (1 year old crowns). A potential yield in the third year would be 1000 kg/ha, in the fourth year 2000 kg/ha, and in the fifth and succeeding years 3000 kg/ha. Recent cultivar trials show large variations between cultivars in yield potential during the first few years but no long term data is available.

Presently asparagus is a specialty crop in the Atlantic area and small amounts are delivered to roadside markets, restaurants and retail stores. However, there is potential for increased fresh market consumption and also enough land resources for processed asparagus production.

Nutrient Content: Very good source of Vitamin A and potassium. Good source of Vitamin C. Contains small amounts of other nutrients including iron. Very low in sodium and calories. 3 to 4 spears provide 10 kilocalories.

Crop Establishment

Seed harvested from strong, productive parent plants will produce plants that are more productive and less susceptible to disease than those grown from seed taken from weak plants. Seed of older varieties are continually being reselected for increased performance. Many high yielding F1 hybrid male cultivars are on the market. Male plants are usually higher yielding than female plants within a variety.

Seed Treatment – Asparagus seed is soaked for 3 – 4 days at 30-35°C before planting. This soaking softens the seed coat, swells the seed, and starts the germination process which results in earlier emergence of up to one week. There is no advantage if seeding is done into a dry soil.

Seeding/Planting – Asparagus seed should not be planted deeper than 2.5 to 4 cm, depending on soil type and seeding date. Choose a light, well drained sandy loam seedbed with pH about 6.6 and free of perennial weeds. Sow 1 kg of seed per 1000 square meters of seedbed, to produce approximately 25,000 crowns, enough for 1 ha, after plant selection. Select 1 year old crowns the following spring, weighing 30 – 50g.

Permanent field spacing of the crowns should be in rows 1.25 to 1.75 m apart with 30 to 45 cm between plants. This requires approximately 20,000 plants per hectare. Lift 1 year old plants in early spring. Discard small crowns (under 25 g) and crowns with close spaced, narrow buds. Grade plants so that similar sized crowns are planted in the same field. Plant in furrows 15 to 20 cm deep, shallower on heavier soils. Spread roots as much as possible, place buds upward and cover with not more than 5 cm of soil. Fill the furrow gradually by cultivation during the first year. Good weed control will maintain a high plant population and vigorous growth.

Fields can also be planted with asparagus seedlings that are 8-12 weeks old. Seeds are planted individually in blocks, modules (large) or flats in February. Transplants are planted to the field in late May. Direct seeding may be possible in some situations.

Crop Management

Establishment – It is essential to maintain vigorous healthy fern growth especially during the first two growing seasons. Weeds must be kept under control throughout the growing season or crown growth will be restricted.

Mature Stands – After the last cutting of the season, plantings are usually disked lightly for weed control and to incorporate fertilizer. Then the fern is allowed to grow for the remainder of the year.

Asparagus fern growth should not be removed while it is still green as it supplies food to the roots. Ferns

should be left to trap snow which protects crowns from low temperature winter injury. The fern can be cut with a rotary or flail-type mower early in the spring and lightly disked into the soil. This can provide 10 to 15 tonnes of organic matter per hectare. All cultivation for fern disposal, weed control and fertilizer incorporation should be shallow and kept to a minimum.

In a vigorous stand the harvest period in year 3 is 1 to 2 weeks, in year 4, 3 to 4 weeks and in year 5 and thereafter 5-7 weeks. Harvest should only proceed if the spear size is large. When the size starts to decrease then harvest should stop. Over harvesting results in small diameter ferns which initiate small buds which give rise to small spears the next harvest season.

Nutrition

ALL ADDITIONS OF LIME AND FERTILIZER OR MANURES SHOULD BE BASED ON RECOMMENDATIONS FROM A SOIL TEST.

Asparagus responds to manures. Use it prior to planting crowns and with annual top dressings. Not only does it contribute nutrients but also significant organic matter to the soil. Caution should be used with poultry manure as excess nitrogen may be detrimental.

Lime – lime should be applied to maintain the soil pH in the range 6.0-6.8. Asparagus is particularly sensitive to soil acidity which is a frequent cause of crop failure.

Nitrogen – The needs for crown production are lower than in established fields. For crown production half the nitrogen is applied at planting time and half is side-dressed in August depending on weather conditions and the vigor of the stand. For new plantings all of the nitrogen is applied preplant. For established plantings apply half the nitrogen before harvest and half the nitrogen immediately after harvest.

Phosphorus – This nutrient is important to crown producing fields and new plantings. It is important to band phosphorus in new plantings to ensure the stand will be well fertilized in this element as it cannot be effectively applied later. Approximately 450 kg of 0-20-0 mixture should be banded with the crowns in addition to the recommended broadcast applications.

Potash – Asparagus has a relatively high potash requirement and an additional sidedressing in established fields in early August may increase yields the following year.

Micronutrients – Asparagus has a high boron requirement. If a deficiency is suspected apply a soil spray of 1.75 to 2.25 kg of actual boron per hectare or apply a boronated fertilizer. Sulfur may be beneficial on sandy soils with low organic matter.

Application Method – Generally in established fields nitrogen, phosphorus, calcium and magnesium are broadcast with shallow incorporation. On newly established fields a wide band over the row may be used.

Pests and Pest Control

Weeds

Perennial weeds such as quackgrass must be completely eliminated during the year prior to the planting of asparagus crowns or seeds. During the establishment year use the "stale seedbed technique", whereby emerged weeds are chemically "burnt-off" with a post emergence herbicide prior to crop emergence. Additionally herbicide(s) that control germinating weeds (pre-emergence) can be applied before and after spear emergence.

Established asparagus can be disked in the spring and then treated with one of several residual herbicides prior to spear emergence. Alternatively emerged weeds can be treated with a post-emergence "burnoff" treatment and then a residual herbicide prior to spear emergence. A second treatment of herbicide should be applied after the last harvest to provide weed control through the summer.

Diseases

Fusarium Diseases (fungi)

Characteristics – Growing stalks are stunted, yellow and may wilt. Fern growth is also yellow and stunted. Crowns, roots and stems may show discoloration of vascular bundles and varying amounts of decay.

Control – Avoid replanting land which previously grew asparagus. Treat seed and crowns before planting. To avoid injuring the crowns, do not cultivate deeper than 10 cm.

Rust (fungus)

Characteristics – This is a potentially serious foliage and stem disease which causes elongated orange red powdery areas on stems and foliage. All commercial cultivars are susceptible to rust.

Control – Disease control is achieved only with thorough spray coverage on a regular schedule once the disease is observed. This spray must protect the new foliage as it grows, before rust spores can land on it and germinate (a 7-10 day schedule from late May to late August).

Insects

Spotted Asparagus Beetles

Characteristics – The adult beetles are 6mm long and reddish-orange with 6 black spots on each wing. They feed on the young shoots and fronds. The orange larvae feed inside the berries.

Control – Leave uncut rows, in the spring, to serve as traps for the beetles. When temperatures are above 21°C and the beetles are seen on the uncut rows use one of the recommended chemicals.

SPECIFIC CHEMICAL CONTROLS FOR THE VARIOUS CROP PESTS DISCUSSED MAY BE FOUND IN THE APPLICABLE PEST MANAGEMENT GUIDES ON THE PERENNIA WEBSITE

Harvesting and Handling

New plantings can usually be harvested for about 2 weeks in the spring of the third year after field setting. Harvest by cutting or snapping spears at ground level when 18 to 25 cm tall. In established plantings, the harvest season is from about May 20 to early July. Harvesting should be terminated early if emerging spears are too thin to meet the grade standards.

Storage and Conditioning

Asparagus is usually not stored. It can be kept 3 to 4 weeks when hydro cooled immediately after

harvest to storage temperature, (0°C). The relative humidity requirement for storage is 95%. To prevent excessive moisture losses, the bunches are set in shallow pans of water. A moisture loss of 3-6% will markedly affect the quality. The average freezing temperature of asparagus is -1°C. At 0°C half the initial sugar in an asparagus spear is lost after 2 weeks of storage, at 10°C it takes 1 week, at 20°C, 2 days, and at 30°C only about one half day.

In transit, controlled atmospheres (CA) are being used increasingly. When the temperature can be held between 0 and 3°C, then $12 \pm 2\%$ carbon dioxide and normal oxygen makes an acceptable atmosphere; at higher temperatures the carbon dioxide should be reduced to $7 \pm 2\%$. Butt ends are wrapped in water holding materials with stalks held upright.

Bibliography

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