



Alaska-Grown Asparagus

by
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Few things come close to the mouth-watering anticipation of harvesting fresh vegetables from the garden. After so many months of white, the signs of green sprouts emerging certainly is welcome. Two plantings at the GBG herald the beginning of the harvest season at the GBG. One is a collection of chives and Welsh onions we received from Russia a few years ago, and the second is asparagus. The tender young spears begin to emerge during the second week of May, and make a tasty spring treat for the next four to six weeks.



Asparagus is a finicky crop in Alaska. It doesn't grow well in everyone's gardens. We haven't done much work with asparagus because most of the old standby varieties (Mary Washington, in particular), have grown poorly.

Three years ago, Rutgers University released the first new hybrid cultivars in many years. They were touted as new "super male" cultivars that would outyield the old standards. Beginning in 1992, we grew a few of these new cultivars from seed, and this past spring marked the first time we have collected data on yield.

The new cultivars were named super male, because the resulting plants were all supposed to be male. Male asparagus plants yield more than female plants which put more of their energy into making seeds than into spears. The super males turned out to be not so super. In fact, our small plots at GBG sport quite a few female plants. Nevertheless, these plants still have gained wide approval in the "lower 48."

We don't know all the secrets to growing good asparagus, but warm, well drained soils seem to be important. The GBG is located on a warm, south-facing slope, and the asparagus plants have grown very well. Several home gardeners who have had success with asparagus say they plant it in raised beds near the south-facing side of their house. The most spectacular asparagus I have seen in interior Alaska is being grown by Ed and Aggie Bostrom who have a farm on the Eielson Farm Road. Perhaps it's the sandier soils or the shallow water table. Maybe the river bottom soils are warmer. Whatever the secret, Ed and Aggie have managed to grow fantastic asparagus. Even the old 'Mary Washington' grows well for them.

References from the "lower 48" recommend harvesting asparagus spears for a six-week period in spring. After harvest, the spears are allowed to grow to form large, feathery bushes. Leaves and stems on the bushes photosynthesize, eventually sending carbohydrates down into the crown. This food is stored over the winter, and supports spear growth the following spring. If every single spear were harvested all season long, the plant would exhaust itself of food reserves, and spear growth the next season would be poor.

We are not certain how long spears should be harvested in our short growing season. However, this past spring, we collected data on spear yield over a four-week period. The results are shown on the next page.

*Yield of asparagus cultivars harvested for four weeks in spring 1995
at the Georgeson Botanical Garden*

Cultivar*	Year Planted	Yield per plant	
		# of Spears	Grams
Viking KB3	1993	6.9	109.6
Jersey Prince	1991	12.1	157.3
Jersey King	1993	5.8	102.1
Jersey Knight	1993	5.2	78.6
SY-4-56	1991	26.2	326.3
Greenwich	1991	11.6	117.8
Jersey Giant	1991	15.4	230.6

*Source: *Nourse Farms, Box 485 RFD South Deerfield, MA 01373*

Originally published in Georgeson Botanical Garden
Review Vol. 4, No. 2, 1995

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