

## PLANTING ASPARAGUS

Though it is too early to plant asparagus, it is not too early to make plans and prepare soil. This crop is a perennial and will survive for many years if given proper care. It prefers full sun and a well-drained soil and is usually placed on the edge of the garden area so that there is no need to till around the area to plant other crops. Proper soil prep is especially important for perennial crops. Take a soil test to ensure proper levels of nutrients. Work the soil as early in the spring as possible but do not work wet soil as clods will form. Then add two inches of organic matter to the surface and the fertilizer and work again so the organic matter and fertilizer are blended into the soil. Asparagus can be propagated from seed but is more often started from 1-year-old crowns. These crowns are planted deeply; about 8 inches deep either in a hole for each crown or in a trench. Space plants 18 to 24 inches apart. Fill in the trench gradually over the growing season to encourage growth. March 15 to April 15 is the best planting time. Adapted varieties include Jersey Giant, Jersey King, Jersey Knight, Jersey Supreme and Purple Passion. These are all male hybrids that will produce three times as much as our old Martha or Mary Washington varieties. Males have a number of advantages over females in that they live longer, emerge earlier in the spring, are more productive and eliminate potential volunteer plants that can reduce the productivity of a planting. Weed control is very important. Competition with weeds results in slow establishment. A shallow hoeing should be all that is needed.

### ***Soil Temperature and Vegetables***

One of the most neglected tools for vegetable gardeners is a soil thermometer. Soil temperature is a much better measure of when to plant than air temperature or the calendar. Planting when soil is too cool can cause seeds to rot and transplants to refuse to grow. A number of vegetables can germinate and grow at cool temperatures. For example, peas will germinate and grow well at a soil temperature of 40 F. Though lettuce, parsnips, and spinach can sprout at a soil temperature of 35 F, they prefer at least 45 F for best germination and growth. Radishes also do well at a soil temperature of 45 F. Warm-season crops such as tomatoes, sweet corn and beans prefer at least

55 F for germination (or transplanting), but others such as peppers, cucumbers, melons and sweet potatoes need it even warmer, about 60 F. Taking soil temperature accurately is a bit of a science. First, use a metal soil thermometer, which is sold in many garden and hardware stores. Take temperature 2.5 inches deep at about 10 to 11 a.m. Temperature variations throughout the day and night affect soil temperature, with lowest readings after dawn and warmest around mid-afternoon. The late-morning reading gives a good average temperature. If taking the soil temperature at this time is not practical, take a reading before you leave for work and a second when you return home and use the average. Also be sure to get a consistent reading for four to five days in a row before planting, and make sure a cold snap is not predicted.

### ***What Fruit Trees to Plant?***

If you're pondering that question, here are some comments on fruit trees commonly grown in Kansas. Fruit trees are a long-term investment requiring careful thought before purchase. Begin by choosing fruit you will eat, not fruit that appears attractive in the catalog. For more choices you can pick up the publication "*Small- and Tree-Fruit Cultivars*" from the Butler County K-State Research and Extension office.

**Apples:** Though we can grow a wide variety of apples in Kansas, pest-free fruit requires an extensive spray program. Apples are normally sprayed from March (dormant spray) until about two weeks before harvest. Sprays from April on throughout the growing season are applied at least every two weeks. You need two different varieties of apples to produce fruit. Recommended varieties include Jonathan, Gala, Empire, Delicious, Golden Delicious, Jonagold, and Granny Smith. Recommended apples that are disease resistant include William's Pride, Enterprise, Priscilla, and Redfree. Planting disease-resistant apples will reduce, but not eliminate, the need for pesticide applications. None of the apple varieties listed above are resistant to the summer apple diseases sooty blotch and flyspeck. It may be necessary to periodically apply a fungicide in the

summer to suppress these fruit blemishing diseases. Also, all of the varieties listed will require protection from codling moth and other insect pests. The codling moth larva is the most common “worm” in the apple.

**Cherries:** Sweet cherries (such as Bing) are not well adapted to Kansas, but sour (pie) cherries are. Cherries are borne in June, so relatively few sprays are needed. Many years you may get by with no sprays at all. Only one tree variety is needed for fruit on sour cherries. Recommended sour cherries are Montmorency, Meteor, and North Star. The latter two are genetic dwarfs with Meteor reaching 10 to 14 feet and North Star growing to 8 to 10 feet.

**Apricots:** Apricot trees are quite ornamental, which is fortunate because late spring frosts usually eliminate fruit. On average, assume you will get fruit about once every 5 to 10 years. Portions of western Kansas may see fruit only once every 30 years. Almost all varieties of apricot are self-fruitful. Recommended varieties include Moorpark, Goldcot, Manchu, and Superb.

**Peaches:** Usually a relatively short-lived tree (10 to 12 years) that needs a great deal of pruning to keep productive. Peaches have the same problem with late frosts that apricots do but may not be quite as sensitive. Only one tree is needed for fruit. Try Intrepid, Early Redhaven, Redhaven, Harken, and Reliance. Intrepid blooms later than the others and it is more frost resistant.

**Pears:** Pears are tough and are often one of the few trees that survive on an old homestead. Though trees should be sprayed, the chance of getting good fruit without spraying is much better than it is with apples. Usually, two trees are needed to get fruit. Proven pears include Seckel, Moonglow, and Duchess. The old varieties that are often found on old homesteads are usually either “Keifer” or “Bartlett”.

## ***Leaching Houseplants***

Everyone knows that someone stranded in the ocean should not drink the water. The salt content of that water will make a bad situation worse. What many people don't realize is that this same principle can harm plants. Fertilizers are salts. They must be salts in order for the plant roots to take them up. However, salt levels can build up over time and eventually may harm plant roots leading to scorched leaves and unhealthy plants. Though this can happen under field conditions, especially in low rainfall areas, it is particularly critical with houseplants. Houseplants have a certain soil volume that doesn't change until a plant is repotted. Salt build-up can be a crucial concern especially if plants are fertilized heavily. Leaching an overabundance of salts can be an important practice to ensure the health of our houseplants. Leaching is not a complicated or difficult process. It consists of adding enough water to wash out excess salts. How much water is enough? Add the amount of water that would equal twice the volume of the pot. This, of course, would need to be done outside or in a bathtub or sink. Water must be added slowly so that it doesn't overflow the rim of the pot. If salt has formed a crust on the surface of the soil, remove it but don't take more than 1/4 inch of the underlying media.