

Bulletin 14

NO-TRENCH, EASY WAY TO GROW GOOD  
ASPARAGUS

By

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## THE NO-TRENCH, EASY WAY TO GROW GOOD ASPARAGUS

Asparagus ought to be, and can easily be grown, in every home garden

People misunderstand asparagus; they think that for some mysterious reason it has to be planted in a trench. This is wrong; there is nothing mysterious about asparagus and there is no reason for planting it in a trench; it is an ordinary plant and wants to grow at the surface like all other plants. Apparently, for some unknown reason, European gardeners long ago got the idea that white stalks were better than green, and they started to grow asparagus in trenches to keep the stalks white. Our forefathers brought the idea to this country. Not only was the plant put into trenches but a mound was built over the trench to keep the upper part of the stalk white. A man from Holland told me that as a boy he had to place an inverted cup over the tip of the stalk when it emerged through the top of the mound - all for the sake of getting white stalks that today nobody here in America wants.

I have been surface-planting asparagus for about 15 years. By "surface-planting" I mean planting the roots right at the top of the ground like cabbage. During those years I have sold roots to about 1,000 customers and have never known the method to fail - not once. It can't fail because it is right, and it is right because it is natural. Nature plants it that way; it grows wild all over my farm from seed sown by birds - good asparagus, too - and the asparagus bed is full of seedlings from seed dropped by the mother plants. That's where nature grows it - right at the surface - and that is the place for you to grow it.

There is absolutely no good in the trench method for the home-gardener. With him it is the greatest cause of loss in establishing a bed. He just can't handle it; I hear the same story over and over again each year, of loss and disappointment to home gardeners who try that method. And they can't be blamed for trying it because practically all horticultural directions (including a government bulletin) tell him to plant that way. Commercial growers use it successfully - they have the "know-how" - and they probably stick to it because they cultivate deeper. But deep cultivation is of no value to the home-gardener, and these elaborate trench directions are all folly when prepared for him. They are the chief reason why asparagus is not in every home garden - the place where it belongs.

Trench-planting does harm in two ways. In the first place, it makes the job so elaborate and difficult that the average home gardener is scared out of trying it. That is the way it does most of its harm. Then, in the second place, if a man does try it he is almost sure to meet at least part failure, and often total. I lost 285 out of 300 roots myself that way when I first started; and last fall a man told me of losing all but 6 out of 200. It does not work for home gardeners because they don't know about watching the plants to prevent smothering. Either they cover the roots too deep or rain washes soil into the trench and does it for them. A newly-set root that has not had a chance to establish itself smothers if it gets covered too deep.

And the folly of all this is that it is not necessary. You can hardly stop asparagus from growing if you give it a natural chance - that is, plant it at the surface where it belongs. It is probably the easiest of all plants to start, even discarded roots thrown on a rubbish heap to die will dig in and go right ahead. You can't help but admire the plant - it is so persistent and plucky.

I love it! It will fight weeds better than any other plant. My own patch hasn't been cultivated in years; yet that good old bed still turns out its quota of deliciousness every year and we don't know what we'd do without it.

#### WHAT TO ORDER

Now to get down to brass tacks as to what to do to have some. You can do it and it's easy. Calculate how many plants you'll want. A good rule is 25 for each person in the family, and double that amount if you want to cut freely during the early years when the plants are small. Order enough - most people don't. You hear much argument over whether to use one-year-old or two-year-old roots. In my opinion, they are equally good, but the two-year-roots give you a crop earlier.

#### HOW TO PLANT

You can plant any time in the Spring or Summer, but the earlier the better, so the plants have a good long season in which to make a start. Asparagus wants good soil and full sun. Where weeds or sod grow well is generally a good place.

You'll want to know how much ground you'll need. It depends on how far apart you set the plants. I know one bed that does splendidly and the plants are only 16 in. apart each way. On the other hand, men who cultivate with tractors have them 12 to 18 in. apart in the row and 5 ft. between rows. You can choose between these extremes. I suggest about 2 ft. apart and 3 ft. between the rows. And here are other things to consider: asparagus does well in a row along the garden fence. In a single row like that the plants need be only one foot apart. Also, asparagus makes a good background for flowers, and is excellent for preventing soil-wash on hillsides.

Spade a good coat of manure into the ground, and do it before the roots arrive. Don't let them dry out as so many do - set them in right after you get them. Mark out your rows and then for each plant open a crack with a spade and slip the root into it until it is entirely covered and no more; the bud should be about 1/2 in. below the surface. Pull out the spade and stamp the crack shut - that's all. I sell roots all summer long and there are always surplus ones that have to be put back in the ground and that is how I do it. I practically never lose a plant and you won't either if you'll do just that.

#### CARE OF THE BED

Put on a manure mulch immediately after planting. I like the fresh manure direct from dropping board or barn - it has lost none of its goodness. Be sure, though, to leave a space, the size of a cup, over each plant so that it won't burn the shoots when they come up. Be liberal with the manure - it is the life of asparagus and will bring your bed into bearing earlier. Use dry manure from the store if you can't get the fresh.

Soon the roots will send up tall, thin stalks with branches and green fern-like branchlets. Keep down weeds. If your rows are wide enough apart grow some other crop, such as beans, between them the first year. Otherwise cultivate between the rows or mulch with salt hay or straw.

The care is the same in the following years. Just add plenty of manure, cultivate or mulch. After the first year, the old dried tops can be used for mulching.

## CONTROL OF PESTS

As to pests, the only trouble comes from asparagus beetles. There are two types--as you'll soon find out--also the grubs, which are the young, or larvae, of these beetles. But don't worry - none of these are hard to control if you use your head. For instance, last Spring I noticed a congregating of red beetles (one form is red - the other is vari-colored) on one plant. These were the adults and I knew they would mate and then spread their young ones all over the patch. I sat there for an hour and hand-picked every one of them. That hour took care of the bug problem on that patch for the year. I don't like to use poison if I can avoid it. Whenever I see a bug, especially in the cool of the morning when he can't fly, I hand-pick him. A cluster of larvae can be crushed between the palms. It sounds messy but it's practical and a gardener thinks nothing of it.

If you have a lot of asparagus and would rather dust or spray, rotenone will stop the beetles and larvae.

## MULCHING OF TOPS

In the Fall, the green tops die. I let them stand till Spring and then cut them off for a mulch between the rows. Some folks burn them. If you do, don't heap them on the asparagus bed or you may kill the plants that are under the fire.

## WHEN TO CUT

If you plant two-year roots early in the season in good, rich ground, so they have plenty of opportunity to build up strength, you can cut a few stalks the following Spring. But just a taste -- it is a bad mistake to cut too soon or too much.

By the second Spring after you have planted, you should be able to cut freely for a short season -- say two weeks. The safe rule is never cut a thin stalk -- they are the life of your bed. If you will remember this rule your bed will last your life-time because these thin stalks are either from young plants that need further growth or from old plants that have been cut too severely. In either case, leave them alone and wait for stalks as thick as your thumb. A bed near here is said to be 90 years old, probably because owners knew enough not to cut a thin stalk. And another thing, don't cut too late into the summer. The plants need a chance to build up for the following year. Here in northern New Jersey, I cut for about four weeks, stopping on June 1st. The bed is 17 years old and still going good.

Time to cut a stalk is not according to its length but to how much the head has opened. If the head has opened so much that you can see "bird shot" in the openings then it is time to cut. These "bird shot" or tiny beads are the "buds" of the "leaves". I have put quotation marks around these words because botanically they are not true buds or leaves.

That does not matter, however--the bird shot can be considered the last call for cutting, although, as a matter of fact, the asparagus is still sweet and tender even after the head has fully opened. My wife and I know this as a fact since we often have to eat the fully-opened kind because all the "good" stalks have been sold.

You buy tightly closed stalks in the stores because the public demands asparagus that way - thinking wrongly that if the head is partly open the asparagus will be bitter. But the only way the grower can supply a full-length stalk with an unopen head is to include 3 or 4 in. of useless tough white butt. By waiting until the "bird shot" show, you are assured of the maximum length of tender, green stalk. Since as a home gardener you are your own customer, you'll soon learn that you get the best and most eating by cutting when you can see the "bird shot". Use an ordinary knife and cut just above the white butt.

When you want a special treat cut a few stalks soon after they first appear and are real short-but thick-say about 3 or 4 in. long and pinkish or purplish in color. These morsels are the "caviar" of the garden, with an exquisite flavor they will never have again.

And, however you cut, do not spoil the flavor of asparagus by over-cooking.

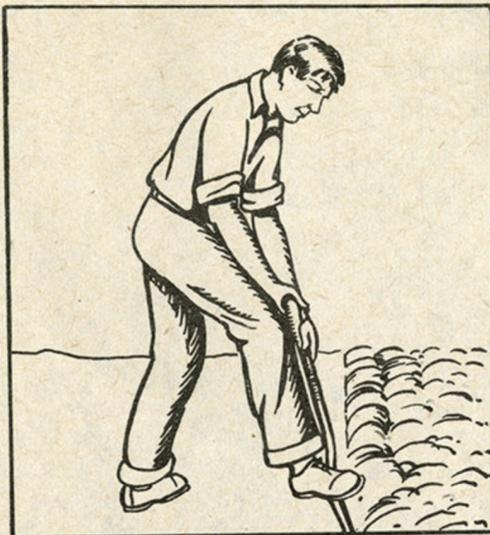
#### GROWING YOUR OWN ROOTS

Now, for those who want to grow their own roots. As thinning is very difficult it is best - if space is not a problem - to sow the seed in well-prepared ground about 4 to 6 in. apart in the row and 1 in. deep. Give them care and in a year or two you'll have plants to sell. They can be dug and sold all summer long. And for those who want to sell cut asparagus, don't bunch it. Sell it by weight in paper bags -- it is cleaner, handier and you can sell the short pieces. You'll practically never have enough. There is need for a good asparagus grower in every community.

And to the average home-gardener, I say by all means plant asparagus. It comes at a time of year when there is practically nothing else in the garden, and it comes every year for frost can't stop it. Money cannot buy the quality of the fresh-from-the-garden product. The only way you can appreciate the truth of this remark is by tasting asparagus that has been cut and cooked within the same hour. The richest man in the city is denied something that the humblest home-gardener can feast on aplenty. And while the roots may seem expensive, they are the cheapest thing in the garden for you buy them only once and the bed will last a lifetime. Every year, without a miss, they provide this delectable delight that is just so good that you can't describe it. Nothing in the garden gives so much for so little as asparagus. Don't miss it, and if you have any questions not covered by this article, write the author.

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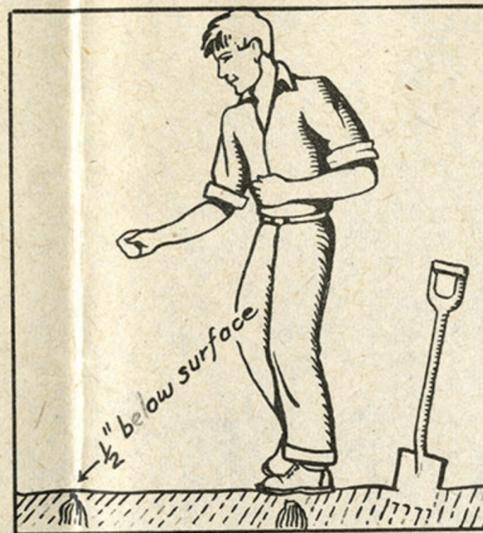
# Take These 8 Simple Steps and Be Sure of Good Asparagus



1. Prepare ground before roots arrive by spading in manure. Space rows 3 ft. apart; plants 2 ft. apart in rows.



2. Open a crack with the spade; root should go in just deep enough so the bud will be  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. below the surface.



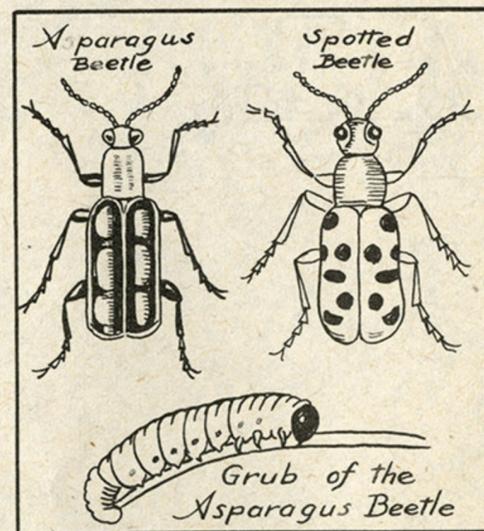
3. Press the soil around the root with your foot; stamp firmly to eliminate air pockets.



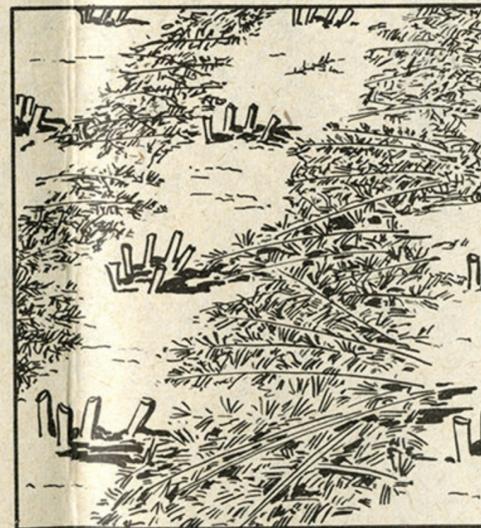
4. Spread a manure mulch on the surface, leaving spaces for stalks to come through without being burned.



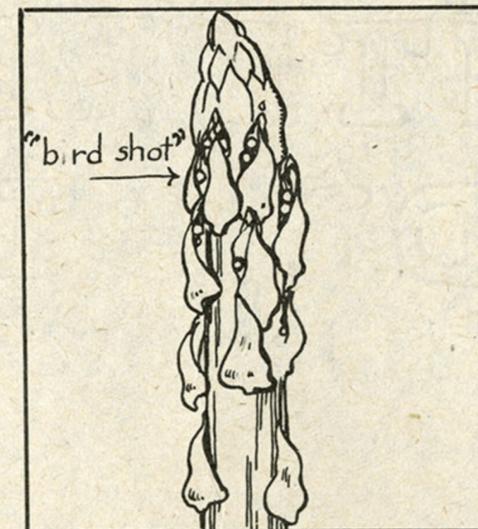
5. Plant a quick-growing annual such as beans between the asparagus rows, or cultivate or mulch.



6. If beetles appear--the two types are shown above--hand pick them, or dust or spray with rotenone.



7. In early Spring, cut off the dried tops. These can be used as mulch between the rows, or burned.



8. Wait until stalks are coming through as thick as your thumb; cut them at stage shown in illustration.

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