

## Asparagus - a perennial favorite

We treat many vegetables as though they were annuals. We plant seeds or small transplants and follow their progress to the stage we want, which could be production of lettuce leaves, carrot roots, or tomato fruits. At the end of the season, we remove whatever is left and prepare for our next crop.

There are notable exceptions to this customary path. A very few vegetables are actually perennials and we treat them as such.

One is artichoke, where we harvest the bud that **would** become a flower if we left it on. It is a thistle, and if you like big purple-blue thistle flowers, forget the edible part and use it as a perennial flower. The leaves are prickly, but some people find them interesting.



*Asparagus*

Asparagus is another perennial vegetable, a seriously underrated crop for Southern Nevada.

Aside from trees, how many plants provide a crop every year for 20 years or more? A moderately well-tended asparagus bed can.

Spears are the edible shoots that come up early to mid spring. They are about ¼ inch in diameter when the plants are young, but over time the plant produces ½ inch thick stems, or even bigger.

The spears must be harvested early, while they still look like asparagus. Later, they **burst** into leaf. The stem we eat becomes leafy – very fine, pretty, leaves. These lovely fronds can get several feet tall. A tall display of asparagus is nicer to look at than the concrete block walls that surround so many of our homes.

Why is this vegetable terrific for **Nevada**?

Our soils are alkaline and salty, which many plants cannot tolerate. It takes a remarkable plant to withstand a salty, alkaline soil, and asparagus is one.

Many Southwest soils have high levels of *boron*. This element is vital for plants in *very* small amounts. More than about one part per million causes many plants to suffer, but not asparagus.

It is drought tolerant; essential in a desert.

Asparagus does have requirements. It needs relatively rich soil, so mix a good supply of compost into the soil. And, while **survives** some drought, it needs ample water to thrive.

If you decide to try asparagus, find a spot to keep it for a long time. Bright light, early in the day, gives it a chance of meeting your expectations.

Several different varieties are available, but the most common, like Jersey giants and Washington's, are less adapted to high temperatures.

Varieties like "Atlas" and "Purple Passion" remain as shoots longer than other cultivars. You should be able to find these, at least in catalogs. You do not plant seeds, but crowns, which look like masses of roots, rhizomes and buds.

It is not too early to choose where you want to place your new asparagus bed. This cool season crop should get in the ground before the middle of March.

You may not harvest during the first two years, although asparagus ferns are pretty. This is a long term investment, but asparagus fresh from the garden for the next two decades is worth it.

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