

As one of the few perennial vegetables in Kansas, fresh asparagus is a treat best eaten fresh out of the garden. As with peaches, strawberries and tomatoes, fresh asparagus has a flavor unlike what you can typically find in the grocery store.

Asparagus crowns have been popping up in vegetable beds in recent weeks, although this cooler weather slows their growth. These first spears always seem to take a long time to reach harvest size. Asparagus growth is temperature dependent so as the cooler weather lingers; growth is at a snail's pace. As spears get longer, they will grow faster so it's important to regularly check your patch, especially in warmer weather.

The best time to control weeds in asparagus is early spring before the asparagus emerges. A light tilling (or hoeing) that is shallow enough to avoid the crowns eliminates existing weeds. This is also a good time to mix in organic matter and fertilizer. Fertilize according to a soil test or add 1 to 2 pounds of a 10-20-10 fertilizer per 20 feet of row before growth starts. If a soil test shows that only nitrogen is needed, apply 1 pound of a 16-0-0 product or ½ pound of a 30-4-5, 27-3-3 or similar fertilizer per 20 feet of row. Fertilize again at the same rate after the last harvest.

For chemical weed control, herbicides can be used, but only before the asparagus emerges. Glyphosate (Roundup, Killzall) will kill weeds that are actively growing, and the preemergence herbicide trifluralin can be used to kill weed seeds as they germinate. Trifluralin is found in several products, but not all of them list asparagus on the label. Those that do have asparagus on the label include Miracle-Gro Weed Preventer Granules and Monterey Vegetable and Ornamental Weeder. Mulch, as with all our plants, is an excellent barrier to control weeds.

During the harvest period, no herbicides can be used, although the end of harvest presents another weed control opportunity. Remove all ferns and spears and apply Roundup to control virtually all of the weeds present.

Past the harvest season and after regrowth of the asparagus, weed control options are limited. Products that contain sethoxydim can be applied to asparagus to kill grassy weeds. Sethoxydim has no effect on broadleaves, so it will not affect asparagus. Two sethoxydim products available to homeowners and labeled for asparagus are Monterey Grass Getter and Hi-Yield Grass Killer. For broadleaves weed control at this time, the only option is to pull them and look forward to next year.

Harvesting asparagus can be achieved by snapping or cutting the spears. Snapping is quick and easy. Simply bend the stalk near the base until it breaks. Snapped ends dry quickly so refrigerate or use the spears soon after harvest. In the fridge, keep the ends in water as you would a cut flower. If you cut asparagus, use a sharp knife to detach the spears slightly below ground level. This base is woodier than snapped asparagus, so it doesn't lose water as quickly. These woody ends are tough so make sure to cut them off before cooking.

The first year you plant the crowns avoid any harvest. The second season, harvest for 3 to 4 weeks or until the spear size drops off. Every year thereafter, the asparagus can be harvested for 6 to 8 weeks. A well cared for asparagus will last 15 years or more without replanting.

Asparagus is, generally, the first fresh vegetable to be harvested in the spring, which makes it a welcome addition to the garden.

Don't forget to come by the Topeka Shawnee County Library for the "Curb Appeal" installation of the Shawnee County Extension Master Gardener Library Series. In this presentation, one of our Extension Master Gardeners will show you how to make your landscaping efforts pay off. Create a beautiful yard that will make all your neighbors jealous! April 19th at 7 pm in Marvin Auditorium, 101 C.