

## Fall Care for Asparagus

Asparagus is a favorite home garden vegetable throughout Kansas. It is, generally, the first fresh vegetable to be harvested in the spring, which makes it a welcome addition to the garden. A perennial crop, well cared for asparagus will last fifteen years or more without replanting. Flavor of fresh-harvested, garden asparagus is superior to the flavor of asparagus shipped to Kansas from other areas.

Asparagus harvest is long past, but now is the time asparagus plants build up needed reserves for the next year. With the hot, dry summer we've had, watering is essential as is weed control as weeds compete for moisture.

Weeds can be mechanically controlled with a hoe, cultivator, rotary tiller, etc., but tillage should not be deeper than 2 to 3 inches to avoid root damage. Several chemicals can be used for weed control. A popular one available for home gardeners is simazine. If used, it should be applied to weed-free soil before and after the harvest season on established beds. As the plants grow, they provide shade that helps control weeds. Read all label instructions before applying any weed control chemical.

Asparagus plantings will be in the same location many years so it is especially important to prepare the soil before planting. Fall plowing, for a spring planting, after incorporating generous quantities of organic matter is recommended. Barnyard manure, rotted sawdust, or compost at 500 to 1,000 pounds per 1,000 square feet will be beneficial. As the asparagus planting will not be plowed up year to year, it is important to put it on the side of your garden area.

Fertilizer should be applied to the soil before fall plowing for a new planting. To calculate the amount of fertilizer you'll need, a soil test should be conducted. If you do not wish to test your soil, adding 8 to 10 pounds of a 5-10-5 fertilizer per 1,000 square feet of garden area is suggested as a general recommendation. If generous applications of organic matter are applied, use only half so much 5-10-5 fertilizer.

In an established planting, 4 to 5 pounds of 5-10-5 fertilizer (or the equivalent) per 1,000 square feet is recommended. It should be spread over the asparagus bed extremely early in spring and incorporated lightly with a rotary tiller or rake before any spears emerge.

After an asparagus planting comes into production and is harvested, usually in June, a side dressing of nitrogen fertilizer is recommended to ensure vigorous summer growth. One pound of actual nitrogen per 1,000 square feet should be applied to the soil surface.

After harvest, asparagus foliage should be left until all the green is gone. Tops should not be removed from asparagus plants the first two seasons until after killing freezes. The tops are essential in producing and transferring food to the roots for a vigorous crop the next spring.

Some gardeners like to remove old tops at the end of the season to clean up the garden area, while others prefer to leave the tops for a winter wind or snow barrier.

Asparagus makes an attractive screen to enclose a garden. The tops grow 4 to 6 feet tall and act as a windbreak during summer months. You can mow up close to the plants, and grass from a lawn acts as a mulch and helps prevent weed growth. To keep the plants from falling over, set posts 10 to 12 feet apart and pull the plants up straight with wire or cord tied to the posts.

Although asparagus is traditionally transplanted in the spring (mid-March to mid-April), a fall move can be successful. Wait until the top has been browned by frost and then cut back to the ground. Prepare the soil and fertilize as you would in the spring. After you plant, water well to ensure good root to soil contact.