

GROWING ASPARAGUS, NOT BY THE BOOK

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THE FARM

Hurricane Flats is going into its 15 season located in central Vermont on the silty loam soils of the White River Valley. We organically grow a mixture of 50 plus vegetables, 97% of them are marketed either on the farm’s stand or at a farmer’s market. We also make and sell 5,000 bales of hay a year.

The farm is operated on an as needed bases. We do not invest in equipment because it looks bright and shiny, rather, no equipment is purchased unless we can show a five-year pay back by owning a tool. Thus a lot of what you hear from me is based on the equipment that I have, you might have tools that perform a job better, but an expensive tool doesn’t always mean more profit.

Over the years we have started cutting corners (in terms of how the text books read) in growing asparagus and have still been achieving the same positive results. We are firm believers in cheating the system until such point that we get bit, then we know exactly how far we can cheat and still achieve our ends.

PLANTING

Most books say to start asparagus from crowns planted 6-8 inches deep with a layer of compost laid below them. The crowns are 12-16 inches apart with rows being 55-62 inches apart. We start Jersey Knight seed in the greenhouse in early May in 2 inch blocks. The plants are not planted until mid to late August. Since we have kept the area that they are going into weed free, the transplants never need to be cultivated. We have found that earlier planting doesn’t gain any benefits but makes life difficult in weeding around the extremely delicate plants. We use a one-bottom plow to dig a trench, adding nothing to the trench, and plant them 6-8 inches deep. Our plants are 12 inches apart and rows are 102 inches part. Since we lay down hay mulch over the rows, this large spacing gives us a tractor’s width to plant, mow, till or disk any cover crop or early season crops of greens between the mulched rows of asparagus.

HARVESTING

We spread compost over the beds first thing in the spring then till it in with a shallow pass of the rotovator. We then mulch the beds with hay and wait for the shoots. New plantings are left for two years. Picking depends on how old the plants are, how fast the shoots come up, and how healthy they appear, we harvest shoots for up to 8 weeks. A three year old planting may only be harvested for 2-3 weeks.

The shoots are snapped off, and banded by size into half pound bunches, then placed in the cooler and wrapped in plastic. The books say to pick the shoots at or below ground level. We allow the shoots to get quite tall, picking them just before they branch out. In doing this we provide the customer with a shoot that is totally green, they don't have waste by being forced to trim out the purple hard part at the bottom. Because of that, we are sometimes snapping off shoots leaving 8 inches above ground. A lot of our shoots can be very, very fat with as few as 4-5 shoots to the half pound. New customers challenge the fat shoots assuming that they are woody; however, they are much more succulent than the thin shoots and customers are soon won over and buy the big fatties.

MID SEASON CARE

During the actual harvest season we will plant greens between the rows of asparagus, after the harvest season the asparagus will grow tall enough to create a canopy blocking most weeds from growing. It should be stated that we do not do weeds, our beds are very clean. We will spend the time to make sure of this. The only insect pressure we have is an early June attack of asparagus beetles. The only plants they can affect are the newer transplants that are not being harvested. Since the other plants are being harvested, there is no established growth for the beetles to consume and lay their eggs in. They are easily controlled with 1 or 2 applications of BT. We have never had any disease issues. With the first killing frost we bush hog down the plants and wait till next year.

THE NUMBERS

The most important part of growing asparagus is the numbers, can we make money. Planting an asparagus plant our way cost \$1800 per acre or .20 cents each plant. Doing it by the book would come to \$5300 per acre or .34 cents each plant. Using a 10-year life span per plant and including the two years that there is no production the average yearly cost of a 550-foot bed of asparagus is \$1300. That cost includes planting, picking, cultivating, tractor costs, marketing costs, and every other small cost we could think off. That comes to \$2.36 per plant. The average price we get for asparagus at the market is a bit over \$6 a pound. That comes out to \$1800 per 550-foot bed, or \$3.27 per plant. Another way of looking at it is our break-even price (which pays for all costs-including my time) is \$4.33 a pound, the extra \$1.76 per pound goes right into our bank account.

We have never had to sell asparagus wholesale, as the demand at the farmers market is very high. Our record was selling \$600 worth in an hour. It is fantastic in taste and is not unusual for individuals to buy 2 pounds a market week after week.

THINGS I'M THINKING ABOUT TRYING

Because of the long-term nature of the plant, and our success with Jersey Knight, we have no experience with any other variety. We are thinking about tinkering with the system a bit and considering making a tighter row spacing, maybe down to 72 inches and not planting greens between the rows, but why mess with success. We are also thinking about growing purple asparagus. Every year we increase our production but we still haven't met demand. At the point in which we meet demand, we'd like to try reverse asparagus. That is when you let the asparagus grow in the spring then mow it down mid to late summer and harvest the new shoots they then send out.