

## All About Asparagus & More

Wally Czajkowski & Mike Zigmont  
Plainville Farm  
135 Mt. Warner Road  
Hadley, MA 01035  
Czajkowski135@charter.net

### Background

In 2008 Plainville Farm planted their first 4 acres of asparagus. By the end of the 2015 season, we were harvesting 20 acres, 15 of which we grew ourselves. Asparagus is fickle crop that requires time, careful attention and a particular set of conditions. After seven years of maintaining and expanding our asparagus production we feel like we have lessons to share with those looking to grow their own “grass”.

### Before planting

Before you plant you need to ask yourself three questions:

1. *Can you sell the asparagus your grow?* You need to determine who your customer is going to be and match your volume of asparagus to that outlet. Are you growing for a farm stand? A farmer’s market? Wholesale? Asparagus has a short shelf life – have your customers lined up before you put the crowns in the ground.
2. *Do you access to type of labor force you need to harvest asparagus?* Asparagus is labor-intensive crop during harvest. Do you have a crew that will pick seven days a week for six weeks? If not, can you personally harvest what you’ve planted seven days a week for six weeks?
3. *Do you have the right piece of land to grow your asparagus?* Asparagus does best on well drained sandy soils. And you must choose a piece of land **with no history of asparagus**. Otherwise you run a high risk of losing anything you grow to *fusarium*, a soil fungus that will cause the crowns to rot. For best results your land should also have high soil organic matter, a high soil pH, good access to sunlight and water and low weed pressure – however through smart site preparation and management most of these factors can be addressed. If your land has high perennial weed pressure consider finding a different site.

### Year 0 - Site Preparation

One year prior to planting begin your site preparation. First raise the pH of the soil through liming. Then incorporate organic matter, such as manure, into the soil but be careful to choose a source with no weed seed. Finally knock down weed pressure by killing perennial weeds with herbicide. Remember once you plant the crowns you cannot easily add soil amendments without disturbing the crowns. Take care in preparing your site.

## **Year One – Planting**

Choose a variety of asparagus to match your site. We currently grow two varieties: Jersey supreme (comes in early) and Millennium (high yielding but sensitive to rust). It is best to plant in May when the ground has good soil moisture but temperatures are not too high. Dig trenches 12-14” deep and leave 42” between rows. Then in the trenches put down your fertilizer (we use triple super phosphate); drip tape if using; and then the crowns. Cover with 1.5-2” of dirt. Once the shoots are 6” tall, about 10-14 days after initial planting, begin backfilling in the trench. Slowly continue to backfill the trenches as the shoots grow until the ground is level. At this point you can mechanically cultivate and sidedress as needed until the ferns are 2 feet tall. Then leave them be until the next spring scouting for insects and disease during the summer and fall.

## **Year 2 - Growing the roots & crown**

In late April/early May mow your field low. If you have a lot of weeds you can burn the field to knock down weed pressure. Then apply the first of 2 applications of fertilizer, lightly incorporate (but be careful to minimize damage to the crowns) and spray your herbicide. This all needs to be done prior to the stalks emerging from the ground. Once the stalks emerge you can pick for up to 10 days. Within a week of the last day of picking apply the second fertilizer application and incorporate. The focus of the second year is on root and crown development so continue to scout for disease and pest.

## **Years 3+ - Harvest**

Proceed with field preparation as you did in year 2; burn or mow your field and apply your fertilizer and herbicide. In year 3 you can harvest the asparagus for up to 4 weeks; in years 4 + you can harvest for the full 6-week season. It is important when harvesting asparagus to take care not to harm the crown or the neighboring stalks. Store asparagus cut side down in water around 38 degrees for no more than 48 hours. Each year after harvest to continue to take care of your asparagus field. Apply fertilizer scout regularly and eliminate perennial weeds as you find them through clean cutting of the asparagus or spraying herbicide. Once you finish harvesting the asparagus you begin the important task of taking care of crowns, which are responsible for next year’s crop.