

## **Asparagus lovers may find asparagus doesn't love Florida**

Asparagus is generally a poor choice for Florida vegetable gardens. That's usually about all that is said on the subject. But if you choose the right variety, have rich garden soil and follow techniques suggested in this article, you may have some success.

Asparagus is not produced commercially anywhere in the state. And, attempts to develop its commercial potential here have been less than successful. But in today's article I'll share some tips from Jim Stephens, retired University of Florida Extension vegetable crops specialist. Stephens' suggestions may improve your luck with this crop. Or, at least, help you understand why it is difficult to grow in Florida.

Asparagus is adapted to a climate that provides several months of continuously cold weather each year. The key word is continuously. Low temperatures cause asparagus plants to go into a dormant state or a resting period. When the plants begin to grow again in spring, they produce new crowns (special storage roots attached to the underground stems). The edible asparagus spears grow from these crowns.

Unfortunately, Florida weather doesn't cooperate with this growth system. Occasional freezes may kill back asparagus tops. But when warmer temperatures return, usually after only a few days, new growth appears. This can happen several times during a winter and the plants send up new spears each time. Since the plants never have a chance to go fully dormant, the crowns are weak and the reserve food supply is depleted. So, after the first year or two, the plants produce spindly, woody spears, instead of the tender delicacy asparagus lovers have in mind.

Stephens does have a few suggestions for Florida gardeners that insist on growing their own asparagus. You may even produce a few spears that are edible. First, try using the richest soil you can get. With some luck, your plants will produce crowns and spears regardless of dormancy.

The second suggestion involves a way to salvage woody, fibrous shoots produced on continuously growing plants. Just try peeling away the outer woody surface. This is a common practice in other warm climate asparagus producing areas such as Taiwan. The center of each shoot may be highly acceptable.

You can gain some insight into varieties to select for North Florida by reading the UF/IFAS publication titled, "Evaluation of Asparagus Cultivars for North Florida," available at the below link.

<http://nfrec.ifas.ufl.edu/files/pdf/publications/SVReports/crop/asparagus/2007-04.pdf>

Stephens says, "If you try growing asparagus, here's wishing you luck. But if your attempt ends in failure, don't say we didn't warn you."

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