

**ASPARAGUS CULTURE:
THE BEST
METHODS EMPLOYED IN
ENGLAND AND FRANCE**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649416714

Asparagus Culture: The Best Methods Employed in England and France by William Robinson & James Barnes

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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WILLIAM ROBINSON & JAMES BARNES

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BY
JAMES BARNES,
AND
WILLIAM ROBINSON, F.L.S.

With Translation of *M. Lehmann's* *Asparagus*
AND
PARTICULARS OF THE SEVEN YEARS' COMPETITION INSTITUTED FOR
ITS IMPROVEMENT.



LONDON:
"THE GARDEN" OFFICE,
87, SOUTHAMPTON STREET, COVENT GARDEN, W.C.
1881.

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ASPARAGUS CULTURE.

The Asparagus (*Asparagus officinalis*) belongs to the Lily family, and is a member of a large genus of plants, mostly natives of Africa, distinguished by fine small leaves, which make some of the kinds very graceful and elegant. The common kind is a native of sandy shores all round the basin of the Mediterranean, and grows along those of western Europe, till it reaches the western and south-western shores of England. It also grows on sandy plains in South Europe and North Africa. The flowers, which are small, are greenish-white, borne in twos or threes, and are succeeded by small, round, red berries, and the plant has a very elegant and feathery habit.

SOIL, MANURE, ETC.

Soils, subsoils, and situations differ, and so must practice also. The soil all round our sea-coast, if rich, is eminently suitable for Asparagus; and once properly planted, it might go on for half a century without any more assistance than it gets from the flooding of each spring tide. Change the scene; place the beds in Sherwood Forest, with 10 to 20 feet of drift sand underneath them, and, without the liberal use of the manure cart, in seven years you would not have a piece of Asparagus as thick as a pipe-stem. For good and lasting beds of Asparagus, considerable depth of soil is requisite. The best soil is a rich friable loam; but good crops may be obtained from any good sandy or mellow loam. Should the texture of the soil be too close, it should be sufficiently lightened and made porous by the application of large quantities of manure; sand or sandy mud is, however, more beneficial than manure in its opening qualities for heavy soils. The situation for this vegetable should be open to the sun, yet sheltered from strong winds. As Asparagus is one of the most permanent and important of all garden crops, and well-made beds continue in a good bearing condition for twenty

years or more, it is advisable to decide, before forming the plantation, whether or not any alterations are likely to be made that would in any way disturb the beds. The ground should be trenched to the depth of 3 feet, at the same time turning in a heavy dressing of manure and seaweed (should the latter be easily obtained, otherwise it would not be advisable to go to the expense of procuring it, as very good Asparagus can be grown without it); and should the ground be deficient in depth or quality, some good sweet loam from an old pasture may most advantageously be employed. These ought to be thoroughly incorporated with the soil at the time of trenching, and so worked that they may have an enriching and ameliorating influence on every particle of soil in the beds. This trenching should be performed in the beginning of winter, and laid up in the common way of ridging, thus to remain till spring, when, towards the end of March or first week of April, according to the state of the weather and condition of the ground, the ridges may be levelled, choosing for the operation a fine dry day. Fork and tumble over with a strong fork or pickaxe the ridges at all times when frozen hard, in order to pulverize, sweeten, and incorporate all well together. The principle of success with this vegetable lies within a small compass. All seem to acknowledge that, in order to obtain a good crop, there must be a good depth of rich soil. About forty years ago a good piece of ground was chosen to make a permanent plantation of Asparagus. It was trenched 3 feet deep in trenches 3 feet wide, and cast up into rough ridges, after a crop of summer Peas. All decaying vegetation in the rubbish-yards and corners was at the same time well salted and turned up. Early in autumn, also, were added some old Mushroom, Melon, and Cucumber-bed material, a lot of manure from piggeries, cow-houses, and stables, a quantity of road-grit and sand, a quantity of ditch and drain parings, turfy loam and sods, quite 3 feet thick. These were all turned over four times and well incorporated together, between Michaelmas and Lady Day, as one would a dung-heap, the whole being left in large ridges exposed to the frost. By April this compost was in a kindly state; it was, therefore, laid down and planted with good, clean, one-year-old Asparagus plants, which certainly grew in a most extraordinary way, and the second year produced wonderful shoots as to size; and the same plantation has continued to produce fine heads ever since. In order to give a fair idea of the quality of "grass" which this plantation is still producing, it may be mentioned that one hundred heads

cut from it now average from 12 lbs. to 14 lbs. weight, the heads being 7 inches in length. Even after forty years' existence, this plantation is still improving, and it looks as if it would be as good sixty years hence as it is now.

Wherever ordinary farm-yard manure is not very abundant and labour plentiful, a good result may be obtained by collecting together all decomposing vegetable matter—old hotbeds, Mushroom beds, pig refuse, &c., with seaweed where convenient; and, when the position for the beds is determined upon, this should be spread upon the ground about a foot thick, and turned over with 2 or 3 feet of the earth two or three times in winter. This treatment will be attended with very excellent results.

The application of salt as a top dressing is of great benefit to Asparagus in inland districts, but is of little or no value in the vicinity of salt water. It should be applied in spring and very early summer by scattering some common coarse salt over the ground in showery weather. Old and well-established plantations are particularly benefited by this treatment; but in no case should it be applied to plants recently removed, for all such, however carefully transplanted, must have wounded roots, to which salt would prove very injurious; nor should it be applied at any time when the roots are in a dormant state. Besides its beneficial effects upon the plant as a manure, it is very destructive to the wire-worm and other insects so injurious to the roots of the Asparagus. Salt may safely be applied at the rate of 2 lbs. per square yard. It is, however, better to give this quantity in two doses. It should not be applied in dry or sunny weather.

SEED SOWING.

Asparagus is propagated by seed, which may either be sown when ripe in October, or in spring; but the latter time is certainly the best. It may either be sown on the ground prepared for the plantation, or in drills one foot apart in beds of light, rich, sandy soil, and transplanted to a permanent position when one year old, which is by far the most desirable method. To get strong clean plants at one year old, and to save a year's strength, sow thinly, and hoe out quickly after the plants are up, with a sharp one-hand 3-inch hoe, or otherwise thin the plants to 3 or 4 inches apart, taking care to select all the strongest plants to stand: thus, very strong clean plants may be produced in one year. By keeping the seed beds

carefully hoed and free from weeds, the plants will be in fine condition for planting out the following spring; whereas, should they be neglected, it will take two years before they are as large as well-attended one-year-old plants. It is in consequence of this very common neglect that many cultivators labour under the impression that the plants must be two or three years old before planting; which is undoubtedly a mistake, for all good growers invariably plant one-year-old plants, and count on reaping a crop the third spring from the time of sowing. One pound of seed will produce about 3,000 plants, and to plant an acre of *Asparagus* requires from 15,000 to 20,000 plants. Some of the finest shoots which push in the early part of the season from certain crowns should be allowed to run to seed. These should have the full benefit of exposure to light and air; and, as they advance in growth, they must be firmly staked, to prevent breakage by wind. When fully ripe, the largest and finest berries, of the deepest red colour, should be selected. They should then be carefully and gradually dried; or they may, after lying about ten days, be squeezed between the hands, and the pulp washed away; but by the former method they keep the longest.

PLANTING.

This should not be done till after the buds begin to push, as this plant, from its peculiar succulent roots, is less susceptible of injury from late planting than most other vegetables; yet it should not be delayed too long after the ground has become fit for its reception, in the end of April, as the sooner it is then planted the better will be the result. Plant in rows 2 feet apart, 16 inches being left between the plants in the row. Planting in rows in preference to beds is recommended, for by so doing the plants are allowed room enough to develop their roots without interlacing each other, and consequently causing an impoverishment of the soil. After being planted two years, every alternate row is best taken up for forcing, thus leaving the permanent rows 4 feet apart. The direction of the rows for the main crops is immaterial, but for the earliest ones it would be advisable to run them east and west, so as to be more immediately under the direct action of the sun's rays when they are most powerful. As soon as the *Asparagus* has commenced to shoot an inch or two, level the ground down methodically, mark out the rows 2 feet apart, placing a stake at each end, where the rows are to be planted:

stretch and place the line tight from end to end, draw a deep drill with the hoe on each side of the line, thus leaving a little ridge under the line, over which the planter should regulate the roots of the plants on each side, putting in the earth to cover them quickly as he proceeds. The hoe should be regularly used during the remaining summer and autumn months, care being taken to remove by the hand all weeds that come up about the crowns. When the stalks are completely withered in autumn, they should be cut down. Should the produce in spring be required in a green state, which is decidedly the best, an annual dressing of good manure slightly forked in should be given every autumn after the haulm has been cut, and thus left during the winter. In spring, before the buds begin to push, the ground should be again slightly forked over three or four times in dry weather, in order to lighten, pulverise, sweeten, and lay it down in an open healthy state, and not in too fine a condition, to get run together again immediately after the first heavy rains, but open, loose, and rather rough, in order to admit the sun's rays, atmospheric influence, and the rain kindly; such treatment not only forwards its progress, but also allows it to grow freely, clean, and straight without obstruction.

AGE OF PLANTS FOR TRANSPLANTING.

For planting, cleanly-grown and sound two-year-old plants are very generally preferred, although strong one-year-old plants are equally good. The balance of evidence is, indeed, in favour of well-grown one-year-old plants. The following curious experiment by a trustworthy French cultivator deserves consideration.

"I planted (No. 1) twelve roots of a year old; (No. 2), twelve of two years old; and (No. 3) twelve of three years old. The results were as follows:—

"First Year.—Of No. 1 all had made growth before May 4th, and the vegetation was fine; No. 2, ten plants started before May 4th, one on the 10th, and the other failed. The shoots were a little stronger than those of No. 1. No. 3, eight plants started before May 4th, one on May 12th, and the other three failed; and, although at first the shoots looked well, they afterwards declined, and on September 15th they were feebler than those of No. 2.

"Second Year.—No. 1, fine vegetation; shoots strong and regular on the 15th of September. No. 2, good growth; shoots irregular, and a little feebler than those of No. 1.