

YUMMY NORTHWEST

MARY ROSEWOOD, EDITOR AND PUBLISHER
 LESLIE PHILLIPS, COPY EDITOR
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The green stuff

We're at the end of the asparagus season now that June is here, so you'll have to be quick to find it growing wild or buy it locally grown at your neighborhood grocery store.

But in case you haven't yet learned why so many people make a fuss over this vegetable, try it, you might like it.

Start looking

If you aren't lucky enough to be growing asparagus in your yard, look around for places where it could be growing wild.



ASPARAGUS IN LAST YEAR'S FOLIAGE

You might spy tall leafy fronds sticking out in ditches or fields, or growing along fence lines on a farm. Some might be found along railroad lines or at abandoned house sites.

It is possible to pick wild asparagus in an urban environment, but more likely you'll find it in a rural area where long-gone homesteaders planted it in the past, or where birds might have dropped seeds.



Some thoughts about asparagus

One doesn't need to go to the mountains or virgin forests to find wild food plants. In fact, mountains and dense forests are among the poorer places to look. Abandoned farmsteads, old fields, fence rows, burned-off areas, roadsides, along streams, woodlots, around farm ponds, swampy areas, and even vacant lots are the finest foraging sites.

—Euell Gibbons,
Stalking the Wild Asparagus

Asparagus inspires gentle thoughts.

—Charles Lamb

You know, when you get your first asparagus, or your first acorn squash, or your first really good tomato of the season, those are the moments that define the cook's year. I get more excited by that than anything else.

—Mario Batali

Wild asparagus looks just like what you buy in the store, so it is easily identified. But if you have any doubts, ask someone who knows what they're looking for to accompany you. People may be very protective of the wild patches they have found, so be considerate if someone else claims the area where you are picking.

The growing season is short, especially if the weather is hot, so expect to find stalks within a two-week period after their first appearance. Asparagus can grow almost a foot in one day, so pick quickly. Commercial harvesters use a special tool to cut the stalk an inch or two below the soil line. But you can snap off the top of tall stalks or cut them as they peek out of the ground. Never pull out the stalks.

Stalking the Wild Asparagus, by Euell Gibbons, is a classic text in finding food in the wild, and it will help you on your own asparagus hunt.

One important point to keep in mind:

Plants that grow near roads may be contaminated with lead and other pollutants. Pick your hunting spots accordingly.



HOMEGROWN STALKS PEEKING OUT OF GRASS

Homegrown asparagus really doesn't need any fancy treatment, unless you are growing it commercially. To grow asparagus in your own backyard, prepare

the soil in the fall by making sure it is sandy and drains well. You might have to add nutrients, depending on your soil type. Asparagus prefers a high pH (alkaline) soil.

In the wild, asparagus grows among weeds or in the middle of dry, barren dirt patches, so asparagus can be planted anywhere. Try growing it in a container—a large tub or a tire works well. You can pull weeds from the patch if you like, but once established, the stalks don't seem to mind sharing their space with other plants.

The prepared soil sits over winters, and then in spring you can plant asparagus roots purchased at a gardening center. If you find seeds, go ahead and plant them, but be aware that it will take at least an extra year for the asparagus to be ready to harvest.

Don't pick the asparagus during the first year; let the stalks go to seed. In the second season, pick only a few until the ferny stalks appear. The third season is when you begin to truly reap the harvest you've been waiting for.

Patience is needed during the long wait between planting and the third-year harvest. However, once asparagus is established, it's easy to maintain and will keep multiplying.

Read more about growing asparagus at home at weeksberr.com/ASPAR.html.

Start cooking



WILD ASPARAGUS, PRETTY AS A PICTURE

Asparagus keeps growing even after it is cut. This means that the sugars that give it flavor and tenderness are used up quickly to provide the plant with energy.

Beautiful Green Soup



1 onion
1 tablespoon oil
1 large potato
1 cup stock
1 pound asparagus
2 teaspoons dill
Salt and pepper to taste

Chop the onion and sauté in oil in a medium-sized saucepan until soft.

Cut the potato into small pieces and add to onions. Add stock and simmer about 15 minutes, until potatoes are tender.

Cut asparagus into 1-inch pieces (tough parts are OK to use) and add to the cooked potatoes. Simmer about 10 minutes, until the asparagus pieces are an olive color.

Put soup in a blender (be careful: it's hot!) or blend with a blender stick in the saucepan.

Stir in the dill and seasonings, and serve.

Makes about 1 quart.

So no matter how tender the asparagus is when picked, it will toughen at the cut end before you get it home and into the pot. This toughening will happen more rapidly the warmer the temperature.

Store asparagus in the refrigerator as soon as you can, wrapped in plastic or standing in a glass filled with water. It can stay there for several days.

When you are ready to cook, you can bend the stalks until they break naturally. Supposedly, this is the dividing line between the tough part of the stalk and the tender part. Food scientist Harold McGee recommends cutting the stalk about 6 inches below the tip. The upper part is ready to cook.

Take the lower half and slice thinly, throwing away the bottom slice or two. Toss these pieces into your dish, or snack on them raw while preparing your meal. (Fresh asparagus tastes like raw peas.)

There are many ways to prepare asparagus, but the easiest is to steam it a few minutes in a pan of water, then toss with some olive oil and seasoning. Any cooked leftovers can be added to salads, omelets, or sandwiches.



ASPARAGUS MAKES A NICE GIFT

About Yummy Northwest

Each monthly issue highlights an edible delight available in the Pacific Northwest and Montana.

Contact the editor

Comments, corrections, topic ideas, and submissions are all most welcome at Yummy_Northwest@hotmail.com. View archives at yummynorthwest.com.