

Asparagus and Rhubarb

Asparagus and rhubarb are two of the most popular perennial vegetables in Kansas. Although each may offer lower maintenance in the years after planting, good garden bed planning and preparation are needed for plants that thrive.

Asparagus crowns will soon begin popping up in vegetable beds, although the cooler weather slows their growth. These first spears take a long time to reach harvest size. Asparagus growth is temperature dependent so as the cooler weather lingers; growth is slow. As spears get longer, they will grow faster so it's important to regularly check your patch, especially in warmer weather.

The best time to control weeds in asparagus is early spring before the asparagus emerges. A light tilling (or hoeing) that is shallow enough to avoid the crowns will eliminate existing weeds. This is also a good time to mix in organic matter and fertilizer. Fertilize according to a soil test or add 1 to 2 pounds of a 10-20-10 fertilizer per 20 feet of row before growth starts. If a soil test shows that only nitrogen is needed, apply 1 pound of a 16-0-0 product or ½ pound of a 30-4-5, 27-3-3 or similar fertilizer per 20 feet of row. Fertilize again at the same rate after the last harvest.

Harvesting asparagus can be achieved by snapping or cutting the spears. Snapping is quick and easy. Simply bend the stalk near the base until it breaks. Snapped ends will dry out quickly. Refrigerate or eat the spears soon after harvest. In the fridge, keep the ends in water as you would a cut flower. If you cut asparagus, use a sharp knife to detach the spears slightly below ground level. This base is woodier than snapped asparagus, so it doesn't lose water as quickly. These woody ends are tough so make sure to cut them off before cooking.

The first year you plant asparagus crowns, do not harvest. The second season, harvest for 3 to 4 weeks or until the spear size gets dramatically smaller. Every year thereafter, the asparagus can be harvested for 6 to 8 weeks. A well cared for asparagus crown will last 15 years or more without replanting.

Like asparagus, it is the stem of the rhubarb plant that is eaten. Rhubarb leaves contain oxalic acid and can cause lesions of the mouth as well as nausea. The leaves are easily removed by hand, leaving a fleshy stem perfect for jams and pies.

Rhubarb plants tolerate a variety of soils but prefer a well-drained loamy soil. Incorporate a large amount of organic material (compost for example) and fertilize well before you plant. Soil test recommendations will give you exact fertilizer rates but in lieu of a test, you can apply ¾ to 1 pound of 5-10-5 (or the equivalent) fertilizer per 100 square feet of garden space and plow into the garden plot before planting.

March to mid-April is the best time for planting rhubarb. This year, with our cool spring, there is still time to plant. Rhubarb is propagated by crown, which can be purchased from a nursery or divided from a 3-year-old crown. Crowns can be planted in a trench, and should be spaced 2-3 feet apart. Buds should be no deeper than 1" below the soil.

An established rhubarb planting should be fertilized each year using 4 to 5 pounds of 1-10-5 (or the equivalent) per 1,000 square feet broadcast over the plot and worked into the soil early in the season before growth begins. Adding 2 to 3 pounds of ammonium nitrate per 1,000 square feet over the plot after the spring harvest season will provide nitrogen for vigorous summer foliage growth.

Harvest practices are key to the home gardener's success with rhubarb. The first year after planting, rhubarb should not be harvested at all. In year two, only harvest a few stalks as you allow the plant to establish. In the third and following years, begin harvest when stalks are a suitable size. Harvest only the largest stalks and only harvest for 8 weeks. For the remainder of the year allow the plant to grow undisturbed.

After 5-10 years, rhubarb productivity will drop. Once this occurs, dig and divide crowns in the early spring by cutting them with a sharp cleave or axe, leaving one bud per root section. These now become new crowns ready for planting.

Some years, your rhubarb plant may produce a large, yellow seedstalk. These should be removed as soon as they form in order to push the plant to produce more stalks.

Both asparagus and rhubarb should be planted in beds separate from your annual vegetable plants so that they are not disturbed by cultivation and planting. Mulching each vegetable offers both weed control and reduces water loss. In the early spring, mulch should be moved away from the crowns to allow the soil to warm. For pest control, control weeds around your rhubarb and asparagus beds and monitor the plants regularly.