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## Heirloom Asparagus Varieties

Learn all there is to know about growing and harvesting asparagus varieties that have been cultivated and valued — for culinary merits and medical properties — since the Roman Empire.

April 24, 2013

By William Woys Weaver

Heirloom Vegetable Gardening by William Woys Weaver is the culmination of some thirty years of first-hand knowledge of growing, tasting and cooking with heirloom vegetables. A staunch supporter of organic gardening techniques, Will Weaver has grown every one of the featured 280 varieties of vegetables, and he walks the novice gardener through the basics of planting, growing and seed saving. Sprinkled throughout the gardening advice are old-fashioned recipes — such as Parsnip Cake, Artichoke Pie and Pepper Wine — that highlight the flavor of these vegetables. The following excerpt on heirloom asparagus varieties was taken from chapter 5, "Asparagus."

Buy the brand new e-book of Weaver's gardening classic in the MOTHER EARTH NEWS store: [Heirloom Vegetable Gardening](#).

['Conover's Colossal' Asparagus](#) [Des Asperges au Jus Clair \(Asparagus Recipe\)](#)

To locate mail order companies that carry these heirloom artichoke varieties, use our [Custom Seed and Plant Finder](#). Check out our collection of articles on growing and harvesting heirloom vegetables in [Gardening With Heirloom Vegetables](#).

### A Brief History of Heirloom Asparagus Varieties

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The ancient Greeks cultivated asparagus, but this was the species *Asparagus acutifolius*, not the one that we raise today. The Romans evidently were the first to take *Asparagus officinalis* (our culinary asparagus) in from the wild and develop it into cultivated forms. Asparagus was one of their most favored vegetables, valued as much for its culinary merits as for its medical properties. The ancient Roman belief that asparagus strengthens the sexual organs persists even to this day. I am tempted to attribute this more to the shape of the vegetable than to its chemical action, which results in odoriferous urine, hardly romantic.

Judging from illustrations in old herbals, the asparagus of the past was rather gawkish, tall and narrow, very similar in appearance to wild asparagus. The fat-stemmed types with which we are more familiar evolved in the eighteenth century. Yet for all the claims about their relative merits, there were only two basic types: green and white, based on the color of the spears. Joseph Cooper's Pale Green Asparagus, so famous in colonial America, was a white-stemmed variety. The old dark green varieties were often tinged with red or violet on the bud end. It is out of these that the modern purple-stemmed varieties have been developed.

Raising heirloom asparagus is almost as tricky as raising heirloom potatoes because the old varieties are often highly susceptible to diseases as well as to root-boring insects. Some of the turn-of-the-century American varieties like Barr's Mammoth and Palmetto are still extant, the latter an especially flavorful green-stemmed variety cultivated in the South. Unfortunately, they are difficult to come by, whereas the most popular of the nineteenth-century American varieties, Conover's Colossal, is readily available in seed from Bountiful Gardens in Willits, California. Since seed is the cheapest and safest way to propagate disease-free plants, I heartily recommend Conover's Colossal for beginners, but with certain qualifications.

Raising asparagus seed requires patience; three to four years must pass before the plants are mature enough to produce harvests. To begin cutting them any sooner would only destroy them. Furthermore, with seed, there is no telling which produce male or female plants until they grow and bloom. The universal rule with asparagus is to cultivate the males because they are more productive and last longer. Therefore, when growing from seed, always overplant in anticipation of roguing out the females and replacing them with males. This brutishness in the asparagus bed is

unfortunately a fact of life because properly maintained, the males will produce for at least twenty years. Do not count on the females to last half as long.

I grow Conover's Colossal as my heirloom asparagus. As a backup against crop failure, I also cultivate Jersey King, a disease-resistant variety developed by Rutgers University, as well as Purple Passion (also marketed as Passionate Purple), a striking new variety that has such a high sugar content that it can be eaten raw. This last variety is really a "half-heirloom," since the parent that gave it its unique color was an heirloom asparagus discovered in an abandoned garden in a remote valley of southern Switzerland. In any case, these three varieties come on at slightly different times and provide a delightful variation of color at table. Because of the diseases that can strike asparagus unexpectedly, I do not think it wise to grow only one variety; a mix is far more prudent, although they should be grown at a considerable distance from one another.



### 'Conover's Colossal' Asparagus

*Asparagus officinalis*

J. M. Thorburn & Company of New York introduced this variety in 1868. Yet it was not until Peter Henderson wrote an extensive article about this new asparagus in the January 1870 issue of the *American Agriculturist* that growers were finally convinced of its merits. The perennial problem was that mammoth varieties of asparagus appeared from time to time only in the end to cause disappointment, and very few people in the 1860s were willing to believe that the vegetable could be improved. Peter Henderson admitted his own skepticism until he saw the asparagus firsthand, and his glowing testimonial doubtless gave Conover's Colossal the boost it needed. Soon thereafter, it became one of the most popular American asparagus varieties of the nineteenth century.

Distinctive for its fat, one-and-a-half-inch-thick stumpy stems, as shown in the old woodcut, this variety was developed by S. B. Conover, a produce commission merchant in New York's old West Washington Market. This is the same S. B. Conover who introduced the Early Mohawk potato, a cross between Peach Blow and Buckeye. Conover created his new asparagus from an unnamed European variety introduced in 1863. He selected seeds over a period of years with an eye for size, and his asparagus evolved into a unique variety. His experiments were undertaken in the fields of Abraham Van Siclen of Jamaica, Queens. At the time, Van Siclen was well known for his vegetables, especially for his Oyster Bay Asparagus, a variety then popular with New Yorkers.



Peter Henderson went out to Jamaica to inspect Van Siclen's asparagus side by side with Conover's and judged Conover's superior not only for its stem size but also because each root produced anywhere from fifteen to forty sprouts. That kind of productivity would impress any market gardener for its profitability. Yet while Conover had a talent for breeding new varieties,

Van Siclen, his partner in this deal, was the true key to success because he developed a method for raising asparagus that has been recommended ever since. It is a guaranteed way to ensure that asparagus beds will last a lifetime. For this reason it is worth repeating here, but with two provisos.

## Growing and Fertilizing Asparagus Varieties

First, the fresh country air in Jamaica, New York, of the 1860s was salty from the ocean and from Long Island Sound. A salty mist pervaded the fields on many early mornings. Salt acts as a fertilizer on asparagus when applied in small quantities. Therefore, inland asparagus beds should be dressed once a year with a light scattering of fine rock salt to compensate for this deficiency.

Second, Van Siclen's subsoil was very sandy, and this drainage helps prevent root rot and other problems that often develop in asparagus crowns.

Wild asparagus prefers to grow on stony but well-drained ground. Add coarse sand with a large percentage of small round pebbles to the soil where the asparagus bed is to be laid out. This will create a soil texture that asparagus prefers, and the pebbles will help retain cool ground temperatures in the summer, a feature that helps discourage wilt.

Van Siclen's method was designed for field culture but can be adapted to small gardens. It is the intensive soil preparation that is important. He dug rows 6 feet apart and spaced his plants 4 feet from one another. (In a small garden this spacing may be cut in half.) The ground was tilled to a depth of 1 foot and then cut into furrows 1 foot deep. These were filled 3 inches deep with well-rotted manure, then covered with a thin layer of topsoil. The plants were set on top of this with the crowns some 7 to 8 inches below the surface. They were then covered with 3 inches of soil. Once they began to grow, the plants were covered again to bring the soil level to the surface. Planted deep like this, the asparagus only requires fertilization once a year. This initial care in laying out an asparagus bed will ensure an abundant crop in the years to come, but the plants must not be cut the first or second season, since this weakens them. In heavy soils, where there is a great deal of clay, the crowns should not be planted as deep, even if sand is added.

When growing asparagus from seed, the procedure is slightly different. Prepare the soil the same way, but fill the furrows so that they are level with the ground. Plant the seed directly on this prepared earth as soon as the soil is dry enough to work in the spring, then pat it down to press the seed into the soil surface. Seedlings must be kept weeded thoroughly, since they are weak until well established. When they are about 10 inches tall, thin them to 12 inches apart. In the fall, cut the dead foliage off at the ground, but not before it has been killed by frost. Cover the young crowns with about 3 inches of rotted manure or mulch. Salt hay is excellent as a winter protection the first year.

## Harvesting Asparagus Varieties

Harvesting asparagus is a matter of taste and personal judgment, but of course, my recommendation is to harvest it young. A few experiments with a sharp paring knife will quickly demonstrate to the beginner when this stage has arrived. Cut neatly and cut deep. If the base of the spear feels gritty as one cuts, this is a sure sign that the stem has gotten tough and pithy. Ripe stems should cut like butter. It helps to use a sharp knife with a sickle-shaped blade. Special asparagus knives can be found in some garden supply shops.

There are many ways to prepare asparagus, but overcooking it is by far the worst. The following historical recipe is taken from William Verrall's *Complete System of Cookery* (1759). Verrall was chef of the White Hart in Lewes, England, an inn patronized by Benjamin Franklin, who much admired Verrall's cooking. The chef's recipe reveals some interesting points about the differences between English and French modes of preparation. By "grass" he meant sparrow grass, a vernacular term for asparagus, and *by jus* or "gravy," he meant clear stock, such as chicken stock or beef stock.

### **Des Asperges au Jus Clair (Asparagus Recipe)**

*For this, trim and scrape your grass neat and clean, set them over the fire in but little cold water and salt: the reason of this is, the French prefer crispness and yellow in asparagus and French beans, to what we are always in so much care to make green and tender; but they eat it (as they do many other vegetables) for a hot sallet; boil your grass but a little time, and serve them to table with nothing but gravy and the juice of oranges or lemons.*

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Photos and Illustrations Courtesy William Woys Weaver.

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