

Spring All Over!

Dare we assume that spring is here to stay? Let's pray it doesn't melt into summer before we manage to finish all of our favorite spring garden plans. Even those plans described as chores are fun in reverse order to the numbers on the thermometer.

Culinary spring used to be spelled 'asparagus' as we waited impatiently for those slender spears to become long enough to harvest. Now asparagus is found in grocery stores nearly year round: one of the places that provide half of what we eat is Peru. It comes via fuel-intensive planes from a dry coastal area in Southern Peru.

According to an article in the April/May Organic Gardening the industry thrives using an irrigation system that is sucking aquifers dry leaving the local people with a mere 20% of the amount of water required as a minimum for basic needs. Since 2002 the industry has extracted water faster than the aquifer can be recharged, giving the region the fastest rate of aquifer depletion in the world, not a status any community wants to see.

On the plus side, community leaders there are working with the industry to encourage sustainable water management that would maintain both water and work for the local people. This may result in some sort of certification process. This is just one more of the responsibilities we consumers have inherited as our food supply has become global. We may recognize the importance of eating locally, but that is a goal that won't be attained without a major shift in economic forces of supply and demand. Meantime, we need to look at imported food as the special treat that it is.

The desire for fresh asparagus is understandable. Fresh is wonderful! Canned is passable if starvation is the alternative and there must be reasons why frozen asparagus is not popular? As a rare perennial vegetable, asparagus belongs in every home garden. It is not difficult to grow, but of course it must be allotted its own space. It can be grown from seed but it takes several seasons to develop into a robust crop, therefore you can save time by planting one-year old crowns.

A sunny spot behind a flowerbed is ideal as the tall ferns with their red seeds make a pretty background for flowers. Organic matter in the soil is the key to success, as you know. Planted in a trench, you can pull in the soil around the plants as they grow. Fertilize established beds in spring and again after the last harvest. It can't be 'clear-cut' as the tops need to feather out to feed the roots. A moderate

cutting can be done the second year, more in the third and so on. That forked weeder, known as an asparagus knife is the tool for cutting 6"-10" spears. Unlike some vegetables these spears taste best when fat. Leave the skinny ones to nourish the roots.

As for variety, the catalogs brim with information about the newest, those most resistant to disease, and other cultural specifics. And if your neighbor can spare a crown or two you will be assured of a variety that loves living in Tidewater.

White asparagus is achieved by mounding up the soil around the spears as they emerge. For reasons I don't understand, white asparagus demands a higher price at the market. The catalogs may not say, but asparagus is delicious raw. A tip: the spears break at the point where tenderness ends so don't cut them, just break and pop into the pan.

I notice they make tall pans for steaming them. Your grandmother probably used her coffee pot (before that became an appliance with a plug), steaming them upright in an inch of water. If making soup you can peel the lower part of the spear and use it to make stock.

HAVE YOU NOTICED THE EGGS?

To celebrate the season, the chair of the Gloucester Master Gardener tollbooth planters' project, Noel Priseler, decided that painted wooden eggs would prompt smiles from drivers traveling in and out of Gloucester over the Coleman Bridge. Master Gardener Henry (Hurricane) Thompson with the help of his jigsaw, turned out the eggs



and propped them on stems. Another MG, Ann Hohenberger, painted the larger-than-life designs on them. Take a look and see if they don't tell you that the people who live here truly care about their home county.