

# Asparagus: A wonderful time of year

**H**ERE ARE some of the questions I'm commonly asked by asparagus buyers:

How do I store asparagus in the refrigerator?

Why do you leave the bottoms on your asparagus?

How do you freeze asparagus?

When does asparagus season end?

Why is some asparagus so tough?

The only tough part of fresh-picked asparagus is the skin at the bottom of the asparagus. The skin can be peeled or skinned off with a carrot skinner. It can then be cooked with the rest of the asparagus or snapped off, puréed and frozen to make soup stock.

Asparagus that has been in a chain store or warehouse for three weeks or longer will start to get "woody" at the bottom. This is especially true of asparagus that was not handled correctly (not kept turgid and not cooled immediately after picking to get the field heat out of it) on the farm from where it was harvested. It is also true of asparagus that is allowed to go limp while it is stored prior to being sold.

Immediately after I pick asparagus, I place it in the picking container that it is in on a pallet, wash it off, stow it in a walk-in cooler and lower the temperature to 39 degrees, in a matter of minutes. Then I take it out of the cooler and place it, snugly, in 5-gallon buckets (tips up) so that all the asparagus is standing straight up. I add 2 to 3 inches of water to the bottom of the bucket. I then put the asparagus back into the cooler and sell it the next day.

This process perks the asparagus and eliminates crooked asparagus because being placed tightly in the bucket, in a dark cooler, causes it to straighten up overnight.

## THE BEST YEARS

Asparagus season, in the Fredericksburg area, generally runs from



FILE / BOB FILA / CHICAGO TRIBUNE

**When buying asparagus, look for compact tips and smooth green stems that are uniform in color.**



**EMMETT SNEAD**

the last week of April through the first week of June. In the last 51 years, I have had asparagus come in only two times before April. The first time, March 18, 1988, it started snowing before we finished cutting. That year, I did not see any asparagus again until the end of April.

Last year was the best year I have ever seen for growing and selling asparagus. The first cutting was March 17. Then it started coming in heavy on March 26 and we cut it continuously until May 25. We had eight weeks of picking asparagus daily when you normally get only

five weeks. It usually gets too hot by the first of June, which causes asparagus to go to seed.

Since spring came a month early but the summer heat came only a week early, it was like having two seasons for the price of one. Or like having twins when you were anticipating just one child. If you always plan for a good crop, occasionally you get a bonus crop. On the other hand, if you plan for a bad crop, i.e., fail to put in all the preliminary effort, then you'll always have a poor crop, no matter what.

## THE ANSWERS

The following should answer the first three questions:

- Soak freshly cut asparagus in cold water to restore firmness and to remove dirt and grit. No one wants their teeth brushed while they are eating asparagus.

- Store asparagus in a sealed plastic bag after draining out all water and air from the bag. Then lay it flat in the refrigerator.

- Do not snap off or skin bottoms of asparagus until ready to cook. Leaving the bottoms on asparagus helps to retain moisture, freshness and flavor. When it is fully turgid, snap asparagus where it would naturally break, if you prefer not to skin it.

(Trying to snap limp asparagus is like trying to snap limp string beans. Neither does the cook any good.)

Another thing: If you have asparagus spears that are different sizes and you want them all to cook together evenly, just split the larger ones down the middle up to the neck area. This also creates more surface area for flavorings to enter while cooking.

To freeze asparagus, steam blanch until color turns dark (two or three minutes), and cool immediately in ice water. Pat dry and freeze in sealable plastic bags.

Emmett Snead operates Snead's Farm along Tidewater Trail in Caroline County.