

Perennial vegetables make for a delicious and convenient addition to any edible garden because they can be planted once and harvested year after year. Established plants have the added benefit of protecting the soil from erosion and contributing to better overall soil health. Here are a few great choices that grow well in our climate, complete with our recommendations for care in the Pacific Northwest.

### **ARTICHOKES Harvest for 5-6 Years or more**

Artichokes are a tasty relative of the thistle plant that prefer a full sun location; areas with reflected heat from walls or pavement are even better. They can grow to be 4-6' in size, so when you plant in the spring after the last frost, be sure to give them around that much space to thrive. Water them well at planting time, and then when the top inch or so of soil has dried out, water deeply. In late summer, large flower buds will form at the tops of the stalks; these are the artichokes you eat! Harvest when buds are still tight and plump. If you don't, they will open to huge, beautiful electric violet flowers that dry well and are great in floral arrangements. You can expect most varieties to be ready for harvest about 90 days from transplanting. We recommend fertilizing each spring after the new growth starts.

Depending on the season and weather severity, artichokes may be a little tender in our climate and require protection to overwinter. If you grow them as annuals, choose a variety like 'Green Globe' or 'Imperial Star' that produces in the first year. To overwinter your plants, cut off old stalks 1' above ground in the fall and tie the leaves over the root crown, then mulch heavily. During cold spells, you may want to cover plants temporarily with burlap or a large cardboard box for additional protection.

### **ASPARAGUS Harvest for 10-15 Years or more**

For so many years of low-maintenance harvest, asparagus is well worth the small effort necessary to prepare the soil for maximum production. Choose a sunny location along a fence, or use them as a background for flowers. Purchase asparagus crowns in the late winter at Sky Nursery and soak for several hours before planting. Dig a trench 1' wide and 6-8" deep, then refill to about 3" below the top with loose soil blended with compost and organic veggie fertilizer. Spread crowns out evenly, leaving about 1' between the plants, then cover with 2" of soil. As the plants grow gradually fill in the trench, but avoid covering the growing tips as that can lead to rot and disease. For regular maintenance, it's recommended to fertilize asparagus with a high-nitrogen fertilizer in early spring and after harvest. Beyond that, just keep your bed well weeded and watered.

Asparagus is a plant that takes a little while to get established, so it's not recommended to harvest spears the first spring after planting. The second year in the ground you can cut spears for about 4-6 weeks starting in the spring, and in following years you may harvest longer and more heavily, approximately 8-10 weeks. Spears are ideal for harvest at about 5-7"

high and before the tips begin to loosen. When harvesting, simply snap or cut the stem just above the soil level, leaving a few spears behind for each plant so that it can gather energy for next year's harvest. Stop harvest when the spears start getting smaller, about pencil size. The spears that remain will grow into tall, graceful, feathery, and highly ornamental plants before dying back in the fall.

### **RHUBARB Harvest for 10-20 Years or more**

Rhubarb likes a sunny, well-drained spot with nutrient-rich soil, so be sure to work in plenty of compost or aged manure at planting time, and mulch with more each year. Plant bare root rhubarb so the top of the root division is slightly above the soil surface. You can usually see where new shoots are sprouting, but don't leave any roots exposed. Alternately, starts transplanted from pots should be planted at the same level as they were in the container. Allow 3-4' between plants to prevent crowding as the plant grows.

Let rhubarb plants grow a full year before harvesting. In the second spring, you may harvest a quarter of the stalks, and in following years a third. A good rule is to only harvest stalks that are 1" wide or larger, and be sure to leave some leaves so the plant can store enough energy for next year. When harvesting, cut the stem near the base with a sharp pair of shears, being careful not to damage the crown and nearby stems, or simply hold onto the stem below the leaf and gently twist/pull until the stalk releases from the base. If your plant sends up flower stalks, cut them back to the base as early as you can so that they won't divert energy that could go to stems. In winter, trim off dead stems and apply 4-6" of mulch to protect the crown from freezing. Reminder: rhubarb roots and leaves are poisonous; don't eat them or give them to animals.

### **SUNCHOKES (AKA JERUSALEM ARTICHOKE)**

Sunchokes are named for their close relation to sunflowers, but they aren't grown for their sunny blooms. Instead, gardeners treasure them for their tasty, low-starch tubers that look like small potatoes but taste similar to water chestnut. These hardy perennial plants can grow up to 5-10' tall, and spread rather vigorously. To keep them in a confined space, grow them in a container or install root barriers around the circumference, just as you would for bamboo.

Plant tubers 4-6" deep and about 12" apart, or grow them in large containers of 18" or more. Sunchokes tolerate most soils, and do well with minimal fertilizer if the soil is rich enough in compost and organic material. When the stems are around a foot tall, you can 'hill' the soil up around them approximately 6" high to help stabilize the plants as they grow. Once our usual PNW summer drought hits, be sure to water at least once a week. Tubers should be ready for harvest throughout fall and winter, and the more tubers you leave in the ground, the more plants you will have in the spring.