

property. Year by year we've enriched the soil with compost and cover crops, and planted the banks between terraces with blueberry bushes, peach and plum trees, hazelnuts, pecans, almonds, and raspberries. So we have come into the job of overseeing a hundred or so acres of woodlands that exhale oxygen and filter water for the common good, and about 4,000 square feet of tillable land that are meant to feed our family. And in a June day three years earlier, I had staked out a full day of trenching and planting to es-

the last of the long trail of these beds I've left

Now, in March, as we waited for a sign to begin living off the land, this completely bare patch of ground was no burning bush of portent. (Though it was blackened with ash—we'd burned the dead stalks of last year's plants to kill asparagus beetles.) Two months from this day, when it would be warm enough to plant corn and beans, the culinary happening of asparagus would be a memory, this patch a waist-high forest of feathery fronds. By summer's end they'd resemble dwarf Christmas trees covered with tiny red balls. Then frost would knock them down. For about forty-eight weeks of the year, an asparagus plant is unrecognizable to anyone except an asparagus grower. Plenty of summer visitors to our garden have stood in the middle of the bed and asked, "What is this stuff, it's beautiful!" We tell them it's the asparagus patch, and they reply, "No, *this*, these feathery little trees?"

An asparagus spear only looks like its picture for one day of its life, usually in April, give or take a month as you travel from the Mason-Dixon line. The shoot emerges from the ground like a snub-nosed green snake headed for sunshine, rising so rapidly you can just about see it grow. If it doesn't get its neck cut off at ground level as it emerges, it will keep growing. Each triangular scale on the spear rolls out into a branch, until the snake becomes a four-foot tree with delicate needles. Contrary to lore, fat spears are no more tender or mature than thin ones; each shoot begins life with its own particular girth. In the hours after emergence it lengthens, but does not appreciably fatten.

To step into another raging asparagus controversy, white spears are botanically no different from their green colleagues. White shoots have

been deprived of sunlight by a heavy mulch pulled up over the plant's crown. European growers go to this trouble for consumers who prefer the stalks before they've had their first blush of photosynthesis. Most Americans prefer the more developed taste of green. (Uncharacteristically, we're opting for the better nutritional deal here also.) The same plant could produce white or green spears in alternate years, depending on how it is treated. If the spears are allowed to proceed beyond their first exploratory six inches, they'll green out and grow tall and feathery like the houseplant known as asparagus fern, which is the next of kin.

Older, healthier asparagus plants produce chunkier, more multiple shoots. Underneath lies an octopus-shaped affair of chubby roots (called a crown) that stores enough starch through the winter to arrange the phallic send-up when winter starts to break. The effect is rather sexy, if you're the type to see things that way. Europeans of the Renaissance swore by it as an aphrodisiac, and the church banned it from nunneries.

The earliest recipes for this vegetable are about 2,500 years old, written in ancient Greek and Egyptian hieroglyphics, suggesting the Mediterranean as the plant's homeland. The Caesars took their asparagus passion to extravagant lengths, chartering ships to scour the empire for the best spears and bring them to Rome. Asparagus even inspired the earliest frozen-food industry, in the first century, when Roman charioteers would hustle fresh asparagus from the Tiber River Valley up into the Alps and keep it buried there in snow for six months, all so it could be served with a big ta-daa at the autumnal Feast of Epicurus. So we are not the first to go to ridiculous lengths to eat foods out of season.

Northern Europeans didn't catch on to asparagus until much later, but by the time they came to the New World, they couldn't leave it behind. It's a long-lived plant whose seeds are spread by birds from gardens to hedgerows, so we have wild populations of it growing in every temperate part of North America where enough rain falls to keep it alive. It likes light soils where the top few inches of the ground freeze in winter. It's especially common along roadsides and railroad right-of-ways that are kept clear of overlying vegetation. Wild asparagus is not always tastiest but offers the advantage of being free. My father used to love bringing home bundles of it in early spring when house calls took him out on the country

roads where it grew. The biggest problem is finding it, among tall weeds, in the first day after emergence when it has to be cut. Dad always made it a point to notice tall stands of wild asparagus later in the summer whenever they waved in the breeze. He would stop his car, get out, and mark the location of the patch with orange flagging tape he carried for this purpose. If the highway department or winter weather didn't take down his flags, we'd have well-marked asparagus checkpoints all over the county the next spring. We kids loved the idea of eating anything stolen, especially with lots of butter.

In my adult life I have dug asparagus beds into the property of every house I've owned, and some I rented—even tiny urban lots and student ghettos—always leaving behind a vegetable legacy waving in the wake of my Johnny-Asparagus-seed life. I suppose in those unsettled years I was aspiring to a stability I couldn't yet purchase. A well-managed asparagus bed can keep producing for twenty or thirty years, but it's a ludicrous commitment to dig one into the yard of a student rental. It's hard work to dig the trench, fill it with compost, and tuck in a row of asparagus crowns ordered from a seed company. Then you wait *three years* for a harvest. A too-young plant gets discouraged when you whack off its every attempt to send up new shoots in the spring, abuse that will make the plant sink into vegetable despair and die.

After the plant has had two full summers to bulk up, then you can begin cutting off its early efforts—but only for two weeks in the first year of harvest. Even with fully mature plants, the harvester must eventually back off from this war between producer and consumer, and let the plant win. After about eight weeks of daily cutting, the asparagus farmer puts away the knife, finally letting the spears pass beyond edibility into the lanky plants they long to be. For most crop species, the season ends when all the vegetable units have been picked and the mother plant dies or gets plowed under. Asparagus is different: its season ends by declaration, purely out of regard for the plant. The key to the next spring's action is the starch it has stored underground, which only happens if the plant has enough of a summer life to beef up its bank account. Of all our familiar vegetables, the season for local, fresh asparagus is the very shortest, for this reason.

Don't expect baby asparagus tips any time other than March, April, or

May, unless you live in New Zealand or South America. Some California farmers have worked out a way to cut a brief second harvest in late fall, but this is exceptional. For most of us, if we see asparagus in any month far removed from April, we're looking at some hard traveling. At our house we only eat asparagus for the weeks it's in season, but during those weeks we eat it *a lot*—the spears must be cut every day. About the same time the asparagus plant is getting weary of our management plan, we're starting to feel the same way. It works out.

From the outlaw harvests of my childhood, I've measured my years by asparagus. I sweated to dig it into countless yards I was destined to leave behind, for no better reason than that I believe in vegetables in general, and this one in particular. Gardeners are widely known and mocked for this sort of fanaticism. But other people fast or walk long pilgrimages to honor the spirit of what they believe makes our world whole and lovely. If we gardeners can, in the same spirit, put our heels to the shovel, kneel before a trench holding tender roots, and then wait three years for an edible incarnation of the spring equinox, who's to make the call between ridiculous and reverent?



The asparagus plant's life history sets it apart, giving it a special edge as the year's first major edible. It's known botanically as a perennial, with a life span of many years. The rest of our plant foods are almost always the leaves, flowers, fruits, or seeds of plants that begin life in spring as seedlings and perish just a few months later when they're frozen by autumn, or eaten, whichever comes first. (The exceptions are the fruits we call "fruits," which grow on berry bushes or trees, and root crops, which operate a bit differently; more about these later.) Annuals tend to grow more quickly than perennials and have been cultivated as food crops for thousands of years. The grass family (whose seed heads are our grains) is especially speedy, with corn the clear winner in the carbon-fixing efficiency race. But asparagus wins the vegetable prize for living longer than one year. That's why it is the very first one to leap up in springtime, offering edible biomass when other vegetables are still at the seedling stage; it had a head start.