



PERENNIALS

Asparagus

Asparagus produces for more than twenty years and is not known as the 'king of vegetables' without reason. It was one king's favoured vegetable. Louis XIV had greenhouses specially built so that he could eat it all year, while Madame de Pompadour took her share of the crops as an aphrodisiac.

Site asparagus in a sunny, sheltered spot and where it has not been grown previously. Dig down one spit – a spade's depth – and remove all traces of perennial weeds to save trouble later. Asparagus will grow almost anywhere except in acid clay or sodden ground. If you need to lighten your soil, mix in grit, leaf mould or manure, or raise the bed. Aim for a neutral pH of 7. If it is too acid, add lime; if too alkaline, add manure. Make ridges in the prepared pit and straddle the roots of the crowns over them. The crowns should end up about 15cm/6ins below ground. Plant them about 45cm/18ins apart in staggered rows.

Don't harvest them in the first season. Your patience will be rewarded the following year. In autumn cut down the foliage (it is great for flower arranging) and give the bed a good manuring.

Varieties. Experts agree that the one year old F1 male hybrids give the best and most reliable results. The RHS has given the Award of Garden Merit to 'Backlim', 'Gijnlim,' and 'Lucullus' – all F1s.

Jerusalem artichokes

Jerusalem artichokes grow wild in marshland between Georgia and Nova Scotia. They were introduced to Europe in 1605 by the French explorer Samuel de Champlain, who came across them in Cape Cod. Related to the sunflower but tasting of artichoke, the Americans, with characteristic verbal economy, call them 'sunchokes'. The Italians named them 'girasol' – sunflowers. In the absence of a more logical explanation, it would seem that 'Jerusalem' is a corruption of this.

Jerusalem artichokes are happy in any soil, sun or shade. Make sure you have room for them because they will shoot up to a staggering 3m/10ft in a single season – perfect, if you want a windbreak or cover for wildlife – less good, if you don't want to shade out your neighbour.

They can be planted in March, 10–15cm/4–6ins deep and about 30cm/1ft apart. Earth up the stems when they are about 30cm/1ft tall.

If you want them as a decorative screen let them grow on. If you are growing them as produce, cut them down to about 1.8m/6ft in midsummer and remove the flower buds so the plants will concentrate on the tubers. For each root that you plant you will get around 4lb of 'chokes'. Cut them right back to 10cm/4ins when the leaves die back in autumn. Lay the tops over the patch

for winter protection. Dig up them up when you want them as they don't store well. Make sure to get them all out before the following spring as they can take over if left in the soil, producing smaller roots each year.

Varieties: Keep a few of the best ones for planting out. A recommended variety, less knobbly than most, is 'Fuseau'.

Globe artichoke

This too can be grown from root divisions but this is not done until April when the frosts are over. Incidentally, contrary to popular belief, the name 'artichoke' doesn't come from it having ticklish hairs that will choke you at its 'art, but from the Spanish name, '*alcachofa*'.

Plant 'rooted suckers' of known stock. Trim back any awkwardly placed roots. Plant them 90cm/3ft apart with the crown just below the surface. Mulch them to keep in moisture. As the flower buds form feed them with liquid seaweed. You may get one or two artichoke flowers in the first year but it is a good investment to cut them off when they are buds for a bumper crop in the second year. For top quality artichokes, divide the roots every three years.

Varieties: 'Green Globe', 'Purple Globe' and 'Violetta di Chioggia' (very decorative but not too hardy). If you leave one or two to flower you will delight the bees.

Good King Henry

Does anyone want to grow some Good King Henry in King Henry's Walk? It is a very old vegetable, but not found in the shops as it wilts quickly. The leaves are like spinach and the young flower shoots can be steamed. They are comparable to asparagus served with melted butter – quite delicious. Seed available from Suffolk Herbs.

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