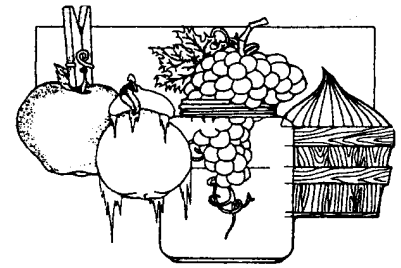


# Quality for Keeps



Information for those who produce and preserve food

## Asparagus is popping up

*Welcome to the first issue of Quality for Keeps for 2008! We look forward to bringing you the latest and safest USDA-based information and to hearing from you. This year's publications will be co-authored by Mary Schroepfer and Judith Lueders.*

Now, let's get started! If your garden is not producing asparagus, look to farmers markets and local stores for asparagus at its finest.

There are two basic types of asparagus, green and white. Martha Washington and Mary Washington are the two principal commercial varieties.

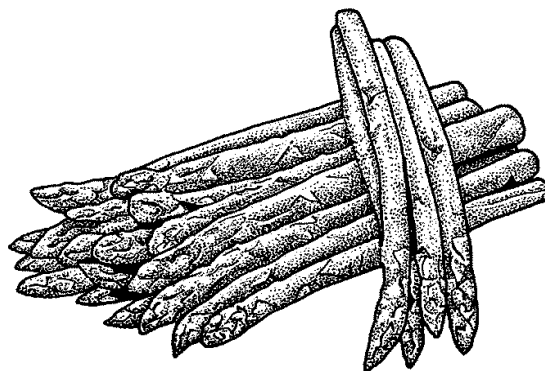
White asparagus is simply grown under piles of soil, so sunlight never reaches the plant. White asparagus is more fibrous than green asparagus, and has a stronger, slightly bitter flavor.

Green asparagus is a good source of folic acid, Vitamins A, C, and B-6.

Choose straight, well-rounded, green stalks that are at least 1/2-inch in diameter. Flat or twisted stalks are often tough and stringy. Look for firm, yet tender spears

with tightly closed deep green or purplish tips. Avoid spears with excess sand, which is difficult to wash out.

**Storage.** Keep asparagus cold to preserve tenderness and natural sweetness. Asparagus is best eaten the day purchased, but will keep up to 5 days if refrigerated. Wrap the stalk bottoms in a damp paper towel and store in the refrigerator crisper, or place the spears in a plastic bag.



**Preparation.** Cook asparagus quickly, and serve with a bit of crunch. In a skillet, in an inch of water, boil uncovered for 3-5 minutes.

To microwave, in a microwavable dish, with tips pointed to the center, add 1/4 cup water, cover with microwaveable plastic wrap, and cook 5 to 7 minutes.

To roast, place asparagus in an oven-safe baking dish, lightly drizzle with olive oil, roast uncovered in a 500 degree oven for 3 to 5 minutes.

If the asparagus supply is plentiful, freezing offers the best method of preservation. Canned asparagus and pickled asparagus are alternative methods of preservation.

**Freezing Asparagus.** Select young tender spears. Wash thoroughly and sort into sizes. Trim stalks and remove scales with a sharp knife. Cut into even lengths to fit containers.

Water blanch small spears 2 minutes, medium spears 3 minutes, and large spears 4 minutes. Remove from boiling water, plunge into ice water for two minutes to cool, drain promptly, package, seal and freeze.

*(Cont'd on page two)*

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**Canning Asparagus, Spears or Pieces.** For each 7-quart canner load, you need an average of 24-1/2 pounds of fresh asparagus. For each 9-pint canner load, you need an average of 16 pounds of fresh asparagus.

A crate weighs 31 pounds and yields 7 to 12 quarts (an average of 3-1/2 pounds per quart).

Use tender, tight-tipped spears, 4 to 6 inches long. Wash asparagus and trim off tough scales. Break off tough stems and wash again. Cut into 1-inch pieces, or can whole.

Pack asparagus into pint jars either raw or hot.

**Hot pack.** Cover asparagus with boiling water. Boil 2 to 3 minutes. Loosely fill jars with hot asparagus; leave 1-inch of headspace.

**Raw pack.** Fill jars with raw asparagus, pack as tightly as possible without crushing, leave 1-inch of headspace. Add boiling water, leave 1-inch headspace.

Add 1 teaspoon canning salt per jar if desired. **Adjusts lids.**

**Recommended hot pack or raw pack pressure canner process times:**

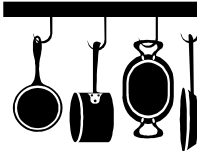
In a dial-gauge canner, process pint jars for 30 minutes at 11 pounds of pressure at 0 to 2,000 feet altitude.

In a weighted-gauge canner, process pints for 30 minutes at 10 pounds of pressure at 0 to 1,000 feet altitude.

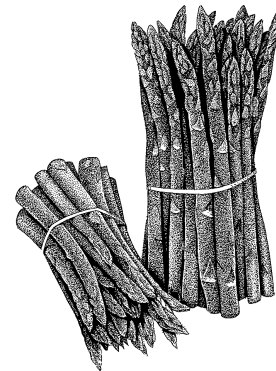
*Source: University of Missouri, food preservation GH1454, Department of Food Sciences and Human Nutrition*

## THE RECIPE BOX

### Pickled Asparagus



- 10 pounds asparagus
- 6 large garlic cloves
- 4-1/2 cups water
- 4-1/2 cups white distilled vinegar (5%)
- 6 small hot peppers (optional)
- 1/2 cup canning salt
- 3 teaspoons dill seed



**Procedure:**

Wash and rinse canning jars; keep hot until ready to use. Prepare lids according to manufacturers directions.

Wash asparagus well, but gently, under running water. Cut stems from the bottom leaving spears with tips that fit into the canning jar with a little less than 1/2-inch headspace. Peel and wash garlic cloves. Place a garlic clove at the bottom of each jar, and tightly pack asparagus into jars with the blunt ends down.

In an 8-quart Dutch-oven or saucepot, combine water, vinegar, hot peppers (optional), salt and dill seed. Bring to a boil. Place one hot pepper (if used) in each jar over asparagus spears. Pour boiling hot pickling brine over spears, leaving 1/2-inch headspace. Remove air bubbles and adjust headspace if needed. Wipe rims of jars with a dampened, clean paper towel; apply two-piece metal canning lids.

Process in a boiling water canner for 10 minutes at 0 to 1,000 ft. altitude, 15 minutes for 1,000 to 6,000 ft. Let cool, undisturbed, for 12 to 24 hours and check to be sure jars have good seals.

**Note:** Allow pickled asparagus to sit in processed jars for 3 to 5 days before consumption for best flavor development.

*Source: So Easy to Preserve, 5th edition. University of Georgia Cooperative Extension. Bulletin 989. 2006*

## Look beyond Morel mushrooms

*With the arrival of spring, mushroom hunters are scouting their favorite haunts, but even domestic mushrooms can be set aside for future enjoyment.*

Mushrooms are fungi that grow from microscopic spores. The most commonly cultivated varieties are portabella, shiitake, crimini and white mushrooms.

**Gather wild mushrooms with caution, since some varieties are poisonous. Team with an experienced mushroom hunter to ensure safe selection.**

Choose domestic mushrooms that are firm and evenly colored with tightly closed caps. The thin membrane under the cap is known as the veil. A closed veil indicates a delicate flavor while an open veil indicates a richer flavor. The veil opens as moisture is lost, concentrating the mushroom's essence.

The average shelf life of mushrooms depends on the variety. A brown or black veil indicates the mushroom is past its prime.

Refrigerate mushrooms in a porous paper bag. Avoid airtight containers because moisture condensation causes the mushrooms to spoil rapidly. Mushrooms take up strong odors, so store away from onions or garlic.

To clean mushrooms, gently wipe with a damp cloth or soft brush. Or, rinse with cold water and pat dry with paper towels. Avoid soaking mushrooms. Mushrooms bruise easily so they should be handled with care.

**Freezing.** Use small to medium mushrooms and quarter, slice or leave whole. Prepare mushrooms by steaming, blanching or sautéing to inactivate enzymes that can cause color and texture deterioration.

To blanch, place mushrooms in boiling water mixed with either 1 teaspoon lemon juice or 1-½ teaspoons

citric acid to each pint of water. Blanch 3 minutes for slices, 3-½ minutes for quarters and buttons, and 5 minutes for whole mushrooms.

To steam, dip for 5 minutes in 1 teaspoon lemon juice or 1 ½ teaspoons citric acid in a pint of water. Steam whole mushrooms for 5 minutes, quarters and buttons for 3-½ minutes, and slices for 3 minutes. Cool promptly, drain, pack into containers, seal and freeze.

To sauté, heat mushrooms in small amounts in butter or margarine in open fry pan till almost done. Set pan of mushrooms in cold water to cool promptly. Pack into containers, seal and freeze.

For breaded mushrooms, cool mushrooms, dip in beaten egg, milk or water, and then roll in flour, a mixture of cornmeal and flour, or cracker or breadcrumbs. Place coated mushrooms in a single layer on a cookie sheet and freeze for 6 hours. Immediately place in freezer boxes or freezer bags, removing excess air from container. Store in freezer for up to two months.

Source: *Freezing Unusual Fruits and Vegetables (GH 1507)* <http://muestension.missouri.edu/xplor/hesguide/foodnut/gh1507.htm>.

**Mushroom varieties.** Common mushroom varieties appearing in farmers markets and grocery stores include:

**Beech.** Petite, with all white or light brown caps, the Beech has a crunchy texture and a mild, slightly sweet, nutty flavor.

**Crimini.** The crimini, or Italian brown mushroom, is similar in size to the common white mushroom. Crimini have a dark brown cap, slightly firmer texture, and an earthier flavor. Refrigerate and use within 5-7 days.

**Enoki.** The Japanese mushroom, enoki, grows in clusters of long, spaghetti like stems that are topped with tiny white caps. Cut the stems away from the roots at the bottom and

separate before using. Refrigerate and use within 14 days.

**Maitake.** The maitake, or hen-of-the-woods, is a cluster of dark, feathery fronds. They have a deep mushroom flavor, with subtle seafood undertones. Refrigerate and use within 7-10 days.

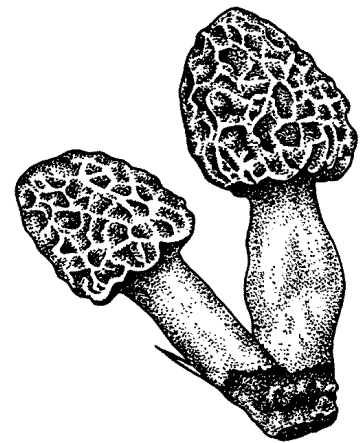
**Morels.** Morel mushrooms are cone shaped with sponge-like caps. Depending on the season morels can be black, brown, yellow, beige or white. Morels have an earthy, nutlike flavor and tender texture. Refrigerate and use within 10-14 days.

**Portabella.** Because the brown caps are so large (6-inches in diameter), portabellas they have a dense, chewy texture and a deep, meaty flavor. Refrigerate and use within 7-10 days.

**Porcini.** Porcini, or cepe mushrooms have a spongy, taupe-colored cap. They range in size from 1-10 inches.

**Shiitake.** Shiitake have a broad umbrella-shaped, dark brown cap. Refrigerate and use within 14 days.

**White.** White mushrooms vary in color from creamy white to light brown. They range in size from small to jumbo. Their flavor intensifies with age and cooking. Refrigerate and use within 5-7 days.



Source: *Adapted from More Mushrooms, Please! By Sandra Bastin, PhD, RD, LD Extension Food & Nutrition Specialist, Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service. 2006. Issued 10-2001, Updated 09-2006*

# Buy fresh produce locally

*Where does your food come from? There is a growing interest in farmer's markets or community markets.*

A major advantage of the farmer's market is that it provides an effective marketing system for the local producer or farmer. The producers are often part-time, retired, or hobby gardeners looking to supplement their incomes.

Farmer's markets are much more than just a place to sell food. They are a venue for socializing, and where urban residents have the opportunity to directly interact with the farmers or producers. Consumers benefit by receiving fresh, high quality products.

Farmer's markets have helped revitalized many downtown districts, bringing people to areas that were once vacant on Saturday mornings.

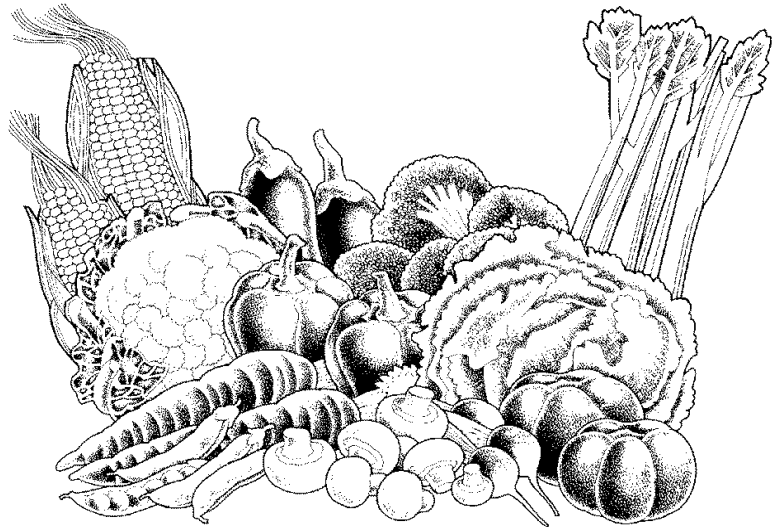
A large majority of people don't bat an eye at the sight of strawberries or perfect tomatoes in winter.

In the space of a generation, we've become accustomed to eating food that's never grown roots in local soil. In fact, most produce grown and food produced in the United States travels an average of 1,500 miles before it reaches your dinner plate.

For greatest freshness and quality, buy local. Lists of local farmers and

farmer's markets can be found on the following website: <http://extension.missouri.edu/ecregion/market/index.shtml>

*Adapted from an article by: Jennifer Schutter, Horticulture Specialist, University of Missouri Extension*



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