

Asparagus is one of those vegetables that people either love or hate “If you haven’t tried asparagus in a while, you may want to reconsider, because asparagus is loaded with healthy nutrients,” shares Susan Mills-Gray, Nutrition/Health Education Specialist with University of Missouri Extension.

Asparagus is a good source of folate (folic acid) which is a powerful nutrient that helps to prevent birth defects and heart disease. Asparagus also contains vitamins A, B and C, as well as iron. It is also known as a natural remedy: it can help relieve indigestion and act as a mild laxative and sedative. The only caution for this vegetable is that if you are prone to kidney stones or gout limit your consumption because it contains purines. Asparagus can also make your urine have a strong grassy scent which some may find aggravating.

When choosing asparagus, look for firm, narrow, green spears with tight, crisp tips. (Very large stalks tend to come from older plants and can be tough but are still edible.) Tips should be deep-green or purple in color. Avoid wilted, flat, or twisted stalks as they may be tough or stringy. For even cooking, it is best that the spears be uniform.

How much to prepare? Figure about ½ pound per person. The best way to store asparagus is to stand the cut end of the vegetable in one inch of water or wrap the ends in a damp paper towel and refrigerate. To trim asparagus before cooking or eating, hold a spear in both hands. Bend the stalk until it snaps. It breaks at the spot where it naturally begins to turn woody – trim this woody section away. If the ends are hard and cracked, cut them away. And since asparagus is grown in sandy soil, it should be washed to remove any grit before cooking.

Asparagus is usually boiled or steamed, but can be grilled or roasted for a different, slightly nutty flavor. There is a special asparagus pan (useful but not necessary) that allows the spears to stand upright in boiling water, while the steam gently cooks the more delicate tips. Or you can simply submerge them in a large pan of boiling water, cover and cook anywhere from 3-6 minutes – this will depend on the size and freshness of the spears. You can also steam them, provided your steamer is large enough to accommodate the spears whole. This will take a few minutes longer than boiling. When done, a sharp knife should glide easily through the stalks. Drain them carefully so as not to damage the tips. The spears should have a slight resistance when eaten, but not too crunchy.

Asparagus comes from the lily family, as do onions, leeks and garlic. Mills-Gray says, “In the U.S., the most popular variety of asparagus is green, but in many other parts of the world people favor the white variety. The only difference between the two varieties is that the white asparagus has been kept covered from the sun. Asparagus needs to be exposed to the sun in order to turn green.” Enjoy the following recipe and for more information, contact Susan Mills-Gray, University of Missouri Extension nutrition and health education specialist, at mills-grays@missouri.edu or visit your local Extension office or extension.missouri.edu.

Canyon Ranch Asparagus Guacamole

2 cups (approximately 1 pound) chopped lightly steamed asparagus*
2 1/4 teaspoons fresh lemon juice
3 tablespoons chopped onion
1 large tomato, chopped
3/4 teaspoon salt, optional
1/2 teaspoon chili powder
1/4 teaspoon ground cumin
1/4 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
1 garlic, pressed or minced
Dash hot sauce
1/3 cup light sour cream

*If you're using frozen asparagus spears, it is not necessary to steam them (just thaw them to room temperature). Combine all the ingredients in a blender and blend until smooth. Cover tightly and refrigerate several hours or overnight before serving. Makes 3 cups. (Source: Canyon Ranch Cooking: Bringing the Spa Home, by Canyon Ranch and Jones)