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Contact: Denise Sullivan
Nutrition & Health Education Specialist
MU Extension-Jackson County
816-482-5850
sullivanand@missouri.edu

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Plants on Your Plate

Asparagus

Asparagus grew abundantly along the ditch behind my childhood home. I am not sure why the previous owners chose to plant it there, but I remember my mother's delight when it popped up out of the ground in the early spring. Unfortunately, I did not share her delight...then. But oh, how I wish my adult efforts to grow this lovely vegetable could result in as prolific a harvest!

While green asparagus is by far the most common, you might also find it in purple or even a combination of the two, due to hybridization. White asparagus is also available due to a process called 'earthing up', which repeatedly covers the shoots as they emerge from the soil. Without exposure to the sun, no photosynthesis occurs, so the shoots remain white. Many people find white asparagus to be less bitter and more tender.

With prime growing season from February through June, asparagus will begin to be more prevalent in the produce section as we transition into spring. When shopping for asparagus, opt for spears that are crisp and round. Ideally, tips should be pointed and tightly closed. Avoid extra-large spears, as they will be more 'woody' and tough. Asparagus keeps for 2-4 days in the refrigerator. Wrapping the bottom ends of the stalks in a wet paper towel and storing in a plastic bag will maximize storage time.

Asparagus is rich in Vitamins A and C, antioxidants that may reduce your risk of developing chronic disease. Vitamin C also aids in absorption of iron. Asparagus is a good source of vitamin K, potassium and folate. Asparagus is also a good source of fiber, an important nutrient for controlling cholesterol and keeping your digestive system healthy.

To prepare, clean asparagus under cool running water. Rinse tips well, dipping in and out of water to ensure removal of dirt inside tips. Cut off any white or tough ends on the spears. Spears may be left in longer lengths, or cut into one-inch pieces. To grill, broil, sauté or stir-fry, drizzle with olive oil and fresh herbs. Cook until desired tenderness, about 5 minutes. To roast, preheat oven to 400 degrees. Follow the steps as if grilling/broiling, roast for 5-8 minutes. If asparagus can be pierced easily with a fork but is not yet flimsy, the asparagus is done. Asparagus can also be microwaved or steamed with small amount of water, low-sodium seasoning and garlic. Microwave for 3-4 minutes in microwave safe container or steam over medium heat for 6-8 minutes. To serve cold on a relish plate, plunge the asparagus into cold water to stop cooking. The main point to remember is do not overcook it to retain a tender-crisp texture and bright green color.

For longer-term storage, asparagus is best frozen, as the desired color and texture is lost in the canning process. Asparagus can however be pickled, like green beans or okra, and still have a desirable tender-crisp texture.

Asparagus with Pesto Pasta ***(makes 6-8 servings)***

2 cups whole grain penne pasta
½-pound asparagus, cut into 1-inch pieces
2 cups fresh green peas
4 tablespoons basil pesto
½ cup grated parmesan (fresh if available)

Cook pasta according to package directions. Add asparagus and peas during the last minute of cooking. Drain pasta and vegetables well. Transfer to serving bowl, add pesto and toss gently. Top with cheese and serve.

Nutrition information (based on 6 servings): Calories: 292, Total Fat: 9g, Saturated Fat: 3.5g, Sodium: 240mg, Carbohydrates: 37g, Fiber: 5g, Protein: 15g

Recipe adapted from Seasonal and Simple, analyzed by verywellfit.com

(Special thanks to Katie Davies, dietetic intern, for her research on this topic)



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