Asparagus – a Healthy Spring Vegetable

Asparagus belongs to the lily family together with onions, leeks, and garlic. Asparagus exists in three different colors; green, white, and purple. The green and most common type is slightly sweet in flavor with a tender and crisp texture.

Asparagus is rich in vitamin A, C, and E, and contains folate, calcium, iron and dietary fiber. It is free from fat and cholesterol, averaging 4 calories per spear.

The best quality asparagus spears are firm with deep green or purplish tips that are closed and compact. Partially open or wilted tips are the signs of aging. Stalks should stand straight, be green for most of their length, and have a rounded shape. Flat or twisted stalks are often tough and stringy.

Keep asparagus cold to preserve tenderness and as much of its natural sweetness and vitamin C content as possible. Wrap the stalk bottoms in a damp paper towel and store in the refrigerator crisper. It is best to eat asparagus the day you buy it however; it will keep for four to five days if refrigerated.

Asparagus will lose about half its weight once it’s trimmed and cooked. For a main dish, buy at least one pound for 2 people; as a side dish one pound of asparagus will serve 3-4 people.

To prepare asparagus wash in cool running water. If the tips have any sand in them, dunk them in and out of cool water, then rinse thoroughly. Cut or break off the tough white ends and remove any loose scales.
Cook stalks quickly by standing on the stem end in ½ inch of boiling water. Cook uncovered for 3 minutes then cover and cook to crisp-tender stage. By steaming asparagus using this method the stalks will be heated more than the delicate tips. To test for doneness pick up a spear with kitchen tongs. If it bends over slightly it’s done. After cooking lift out the spears and let them drain for a minute on a paper towel.

Asparagus can be cooked in the microwave. Arrange a pound of spears in an oblong microwaveable dish, with the tips pointing toward the center. Add ½ cup water and cover with microwave-safe plastic wrap. Halfway through the cooking time of 5-7 minutes rotate the dish.

Serve asparagus with light seasoning rather than a heavy cream or butter sauce. Use any of the following seasonings in small amounts until you decide your preferences: almond, dry mustard, nutmeg, tarragon, caraway seed, garlic, onion, curry, lemon, and sour cream. For suggestions and recipes for preparing asparagus visit www.asparagus.org.

If you want to store some fresh asparagus to enjoy after the growing season freezing is the preferred preservation method. After washing and trimming the stalks, blanch small spears 2 minutes, medium spears 3 minutes, and large spears 4 minutes. Then quickly cool in ice water at least the same length of time as blanched. Drain well, package, label and freeze.

Complete directions for freezing asparagus and other spring vegetables can be found at http://www.uga.edu/nchfp/; click on the link for freezing.

One of the signs of spring is enjoying fresh asparagus. Check out the local farmers’ markets and your grocery store for locally grown asparagus. For more information on Washington County Farmers’ markets visit http://marylandsbest.net/.

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