



Food Safety & Nutrition

Asparagus Season Is Here!



Sandra Brown

Food Safety and Nutrition Faculty

Spring is here and one of the first crops of the season is asparagus. Asparagus (*Asparagus officinalis*) is a member of the lily family and only grows in the cool spring weather. Therefore, it is a good candidate for freezing, canning and pickling.

Asparagus is one of the most nutrient dense vegetables in existence. A 5.3 ounce serving (approximately 5 spears) has only 20 calories, 0 fat or cholesterol, 5 milligrams of sodium, 400 milligrams of potassium, 3 grams of fiber, 60% of the USRDA of Folic Acid, and are excellent sources of thiamin and vitamin B6.

Selecting Asparagus

Choose spears that are firm, fresh, with straight, green (possibly tinged with purple) and spears with closed, compact tips and uniform diameter. When spears are uniform in size they will cook in the same amount of time. Larger diameter spears are more tender.

Storing Asparagus

The quality deteriorates very rapidly after it has been harvested. Keep fresh asparagus clean, cold and covered. Trim the stem ends about 1/4 inch and wash in warm water several times. Pat dry and place in moisture-proof wrapping. Refrigerate and use within 2 or 3 days for best quality. To maintain freshness, wrap a moist paper towel around the stem ends, or stand upright in two inches of cold water.

Cooking Asparagus

Trim stem ends slightly and cook fresh asparagus for 5 -8 minutes in boiling water for a crisp and tender result.

You can also cook asparagus in the microwave. Place one pound of fresh asparagus by in a microwavable baking dish or serving bowl. If cooking whole spears, arrange with tips in center. Add about 1/4 cup water and cover tightly. Microwave at 100% power for 4 to 7 minutes for spears; 3 to 5 minutes for cuts and tips. Stir or turn halfway through cooking time.

If you have a lot of asparagus you can keep it by freezing, canning or pickling it. Here's how to do all three:

Freezing

Select tender tips of asparagus. Wash spears thoroughly under running water and sort into sizes. Trim stalks and remove the scales with a sharp knife. Cut into even lengths to fit into freezer containers or bags. Asparagus should be blanched – immersed in boiling water -- for 2-4 minutes depending on the size of the stalks. The blanching kills

enzymes that could cause the asparagus to become tough and taste woody. After blanching, cool it in ice water for the same length of time it was blanched. This stops the cooking process. After cooling, drain and pat dry. Pack asparagus spears into containers or freezer bags, seal and freeze.

Canning

Wash asparagus thoroughly and trim scales and tough ends. Wash again and cut into 1-inch pieces or leave whole. Pack raw asparagus tightly into jars leaving 1-inch head space. Add boiling water. If you like, add ½ teaspoon of salt per pint. Remove any air bubbles and cover with two-piece lid. Process in a pressure canner at 11 pounds pressure for 30 minutes for pints and 40 minutes for quarts.

You can fit more into the jars if you pack the asparagus while it's hot. Using this hot pack method will give you a darker colored asparagus and will be more cooked. To hot pack cover washed asparagus with boiling water and boil for 3 minutes. Place the hot asparagus spears into hot jars, cover with boiling water and remove the air bubbles. Salt if you wish. Cover with a two-piece lid and process in a pressure canner. Process at 11 pounds pressure for 30 minutes for pints and 40 minutes for quarts.

Note that there is no safe way to can asparagus using a water-bath canner. If you don't want to use a pressure canner, you need to pickle it or freeze it.

Pickling

Pickling asparagus very easy and produces a product that tastes great and appears to be a lot of work. It involves covering raw asparagus with hot pickling brine. The brine contains vinegar, which retards the harmful bacteria that otherwise would grow. Pickled asparagus can be kept in the refrigerator up to 4 weeks. If you want to save it for gifts later or to savor during the winter months then be sure to heat process it in a boiling water bath canner. See the recipe below for the exact procedures.

Washington Pickled Asparagus

Wash and trim 8 pints of asparagus spears. Cut them to fit the pint or quart jars.

Combine: 6 cups of water, 6 cups white vinegar, 6 tablespoons salt and 2 teaspoons of pickling spices (tied in a white cloth bag) in a pan and bring to a boil.

Pack raw asparagus spears into the jars, tips down for easy removal.

Cover with the boiling brine solution and add one clove of garlic per jar.

Remove the air bubbles, cover with two-piece lids and process in a boiling water bath canner. Process pints or quarts for 10 minutes.

For more information contact the WSU Extension office at 360-397-6060.
