About – Asparagus was first cultivated some 2000 years ago in the eastern Mediterranean area that is now Greece. The word asparagus comes from the Greek word for “shoot” or “sprout.” It gained popularity in Europe in the 16th Century and was subsequently brought to this country by the early Colonists. The spring and early summer harvest in California accounts for nearly 80% of the asparagus grown in the United States with Washington and Michigan also being important producers. We also import asparagus from Central and South America during the fall and winter. Peru is the world’s number one exporter of asparagus.

Asparagus is a member of the lily family. It is a perennial that takes three years of growth before it produces its first crop, after which it can remain productive for up to fifteen years. Asparagus is a very labor-intensive crop that requires hand cutting of each and every spear. The most widely marketed asparagus is green in color; however, in today’s supermarket, it is quite common to see white and even purple asparagus. White asparagus is simply green asparagus that has been denied light. Purple asparagus is actually a different variety of Italian heritage and is more often seen in Eastern markets. Asparagus is usually sold in pre-banded bunches of varying weights or in plastic bags or containers.

Selection – Whether you are purchasing white or green asparagus, try to find bunches that have fairly uniform diameter spears as this will make for even cooking. It is a common misconception that the diameter of the spears relates to tenderness. It is actually color that is the best indicator. The rule of thumb is the greener the asparagus (or whiter if you are purchasing white asparagus), the tenderer it will be. The tips should be compact and firm and the spears should not be visibly dehydrated.

Storage – Asparagus should always be refrigerated. Place it in the vegetable drawer of the refrigerator in a plastic bag. Wrapping the bottom of the spears in a moist paper towel will help to retain moisture and freshness if you are not using it within a day. Plan your purchase so you use the asparagus within 2 to 3 days. Asparagus can also be blanched and frozen for later use.

Preparation and Uses – Asparagus can be prepared in a number of ways. It can be boiled, steamed, sautéed, grilled, microwaved and stir-fried. It can also be eaten raw, for instance, as an appetizer with a dip. You should always rinse asparagus thoroughly and trim the ends of the spears prior to cooking.

Nutrition – Asparagus is one of nature’s most beneficial vegetables. A single 5.3 ounce serving contains 60% of the RDA of folic acid, a nutrient vital to the formation of blood cells and prevention of liver disease. A serving also contains 20% of the RDA of vitamin C and is a significant source of potassium, thiamin, vitamin A and vitamin B6. Asparagus also contains rutin, which helps to strengthen capillary walls. Research data from the American Cancer Institute indicates that asparagus is the highest tested food containing glutathione, an important cancer fighter. At just 20 calories per serving, asparagus contains no cholesterol and no fat.

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