

Asparagus officinalis

[Synonyms : *Asparagus caspius*, *Asparagus longifolius*, *Asparagus officinalis* var. *altilis*, *Asparagus officinalis* var. *caspius*, *Asparagus officinalis* subsp. *officinalis*, *Asparagus polyphyllus*]

GARDEN ASPARAGUS is an annual or perennial. Native from Europe (including western Britain) to central Asia and to North Africa, it has small yellowish-green flowers.

It is also known as *Asparago oficina* (Esperanto), Asparagus (English, Swedish), Asparagus fern, *Asparágus lekársky* (Slovak), *Asperge* (Dutch, French), *Asperge alimentaire* (French), *Asperge commune* (French), *Asperge de culture* (French), *Asperge maraîchère* (French), *Asperge officinale* (French), Asperging herb, *Beluš* (Croatian, Slovenian), *Betrica* (Serbian), *Chřest obecný* (Czech), *Chřest lékařský* (Czech), Common asparagus, *Espárrago* (Spanish), *Espárrago de jardín* (Spanish), Fern weed, Grass, *Halgun* (Arabic, Persian), *Halyun* (Hindi), *Harthawariya* (Singhalese), *Hikua* (Bengali), *Kalenac* (Serbian), *Kolenac* (Serbian), *Kuka* (Serbian), *Kuke* (Serbian), *Kukovina* (Bosnian, Serbian), *Kurilo* (Nepalese), *Lo sun* (Chinese), *Mãng tây* (Vietnamese), *Mekostruk* (Bosnian), *Navadni beluš* (Slovenian), *Oranda kiji kakushi* (Japanese), *Parsa* (Finnish), *Pitome šparoge* (Croatian), *Samovilska metla* (Serbian), *Smerečica* (Slovenian), *Šparga* (Croatian, Serbian), *Spargel* (German), *Špargelj* (Slovenian), *Špargla* (Serbian), *Špargl'a* (Slovakian), *Špargle* (Croatian), *Šparglin* (Slovenian), *Šparoga* (Bosnian, Croatian), *Šparoga vrtna* (Croatian, Serbian), *Šparogama* (Croatian), *Šparoge* (Croatian), *Šparožina* (Serbian), *Sparris* (Swedish), Sparrow grass, Sparrow weed, *Šparugama* (Croatian), *Sperage*, *Spragg* (Maltese), *Vanlig sparris* (Swedish), *Vilina metla* (Serbian), *Vrtni beluš* (Slovenian), *Vrtni špargelj* (Slovenian), White asparagus, and Wild asparagus.

Warning – garden asparagus should not be taken internally if suffering from kidney disorders or diabetes. Some authorities believe the berries may be poisonous and should be avoided. The young foliage can cause dermatitis.

Garden asparagus is a protected plant in the wild in the Irish Republic under the Flora Protection Order 1987.

Officinalis means ‘of the shop (usually the apothecary’s or herbalist’s)’. Certain plants used for medicinal purposes, whether of actual or legendary value, were kept readily available and acquired this name.

The progression leading to today’s name Asparagus would appear to be fairly convoluted even though authorities state that it was a name used in Greek and Roman times. They note a Persian word for ‘sprout’ *asparag* and suggest that this developed by the 16th and 17th Centuries into, for the English, *Sperage*. Then this latter was corrupted to ‘sparagus’ or Sparrow grass (subsequently shortened to Grass) until some time in the 19th Century which saw today’s name Asparagus emerge. One footnote remains and that is that it would seem that those ‘in the know’ who cultivate the delicacy still refer to it as Grass.

Asparagus was familiar to the ancient Egyptians (particularly their priests) as bundles of it are understood to have been presented as offerings to the gods. The ancient Greeks relished the young shoots of the wild plant as a food, and the Romans actually contributed to the development of garden asparagus – using methods according to the Roman statesman, Cato the Elder (234-149 BC) that would appear to differ little from those of today. It was

alleged that some of the varieties available at that time produced stems of $\frac{1}{3}$ lb. in weight and for those who wonder if this would have been more credible in Roman pounds that weight is equivalent to about 10 oz. in today's avoirdupois. Pliny (23-79 AD) tells us however that garden asparagus was something that could only be afforded by the rich and he was also understood to have been disparaging about the quality of the cultivated plant as he felt the wild plant could not be improved upon.

To this point in time garden asparagus had not only assumed a role of exclusivity but had also acquired the underlying tone of an aphrodisiac for many people. Despite this positive reputation it seems not only to have experienced a decline in popularity between the end of the Roman Empire and the Middle Ages amongst those peoples already familiar with it, but it also seems to have made little impression as yet in countries north and west of Italy. The Arabs are said to have introduced it to Spain (where they encouraged its growth as they did also during their colonisation of Syria and Egypt after the fall of the Roman Empire) and in time garden asparagus began to filter into France. Around 1300 its growth in the vicinity of Paris is mentioned. Then a revival begins in Italy and by the end of the 16th Century it had become so popular there that farmers within range of the market in Venice found it was profitable to replace their fields of corn (*Triticum*) and flax (*Linum*) with a garden asparagus crop – and much of that now grown in north-eastern Italy has a 300-year old pedigree. It is said to have been first professionally cultivated in France in the 17th Century and was promoted by the Sun King, Louis XIV (1638-1715) who enjoyed fresh garden asparagus from December onwards when special 'hot-beds' were laid out at Versailles so that the crowns could be forced from September. He and his Court ate the succulent stems with their fingers instead of cutlery (which until then had been the custom in Europe) and to counter sticky fingers 'polite society' adopted the fingerbowl from then on. Across the Channel the custom is said to have been introduced to England during the same period, the 16th (some authorities say 1538) and 17th Centuries.

It would seem that crowns of garden asparagus accompanied French colonists to North America in the 17th Century, and in Quebec its 'special' status has been maintained to this day – although some authorities declare that it was never cultivated widely there until the latter part of the 19th Century.

The plant became familiar to some North American Indian tribes including the Iroquois, Cherokee and Isleta all of whom seem to have adopted the Europeans' partiality for it as a food. (For the Cherokee and Iroquois garden asparagus was also a source of medicine. The former used a plant infusion to treat rickets, and the latter prescribed a bark decoction to treat blood as well as using the stalks and roots in remedies for rheumatism.)

France dominates the world in the production of garden asparagus nowadays, and the authenticity of its origins indicated by the labelling (or lack of it) on the bundles is taken very seriously by the connoisseur.

Although garden asparagus (of which there are more than 40 varieties) is considered to be a delicacy today in western Europe it is used as cattle fodder on the steppes of eastern Europe where it grows wild in quantity.

The black seeds have been used in the past as a substitute for coffee. The roots are one of the ingredients (with those of butcher's-broom (*Ruscus aculeatus*), garden parsley (*Petroselinum crispum*), fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare var. dulce*) and celery (*Apium graveolens var. dulce*)) in a celebrated liqueur called Five Roots Liqueur.

Medicinally, its diuretic and laxative qualities (the latter due to the high fibre content) led to its recognition as an ingredient in the herbalist's repertoire and some European herbalists believe it can also increase the libido (supporting the earlier alleged aphrodisiacal qualities). At one time it was thought to have a harmful effect on eyesight, on the other

hand it was recommended for the treatment of fluid retention, gout, neuritis and rheumatism. Today garden asparagus can be a commercial ingredient in some proprietary medicines and it is also used in homoeopathic treatments.