



ASPARAGUS TIPS

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UCCE El Dorado County Master Food Preserver

Asparagus is the herald of spring, and when their tender stalks are in season, it is the time that we see daffodils and flowering fruit trees along our country roads. Asparagus is seasonally available during March through June.

Low in calories (less than 4 calories per spear) and sodium, asparagus is a nutrient-dense food that is high in folic acid and is a good source of potassium, fiber, vitamin B6, vitamins A and C, and thiamin.

Choose young, slender spears for tenderness. More mature stems are thick and tough, and you will need to snap off those tough bottom ends. The most delicate taste is in the asparagus tips. Look for firm, fresh, spears with closed, compact tips and uniform diameter, so that all spears will cook in the same amount of time. Always rinse asparagus well under cool running water – do not soak or use detergents to clean.

Asparagus can be prepared in a variety of ways. Use pieces raw in salads, or steam in a double boiler by covering pot with a lid and steaming until tender, about 5 to 8 minutes. To stir fry, cut spears diagonally in 1/2 inch pieces, leaving tips whole. Stir-fry pieces in hot oil or butter in a skillet or wok at medium high heat. Stir constantly until tender-crisp, 3 to 5 minutes. Microwave fresh asparagus by placing one pound 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, or 3 to 5 minutes for cuts and tips. Stir or turn halfway through cooking time.

Asparagus can also be pressure canned or pickled using approved and safe recipes (we recommend the recipes at the National Center for Home Food Preservation at <http://nchfp.uga.edu/>).

Freezing is a nutritionally superb way to preserve fresh asparagus. Asparagus maintains better quality during freezer storage if it is blanched, which is heating enough to destroy enzymes, before freezing. Enzyme action can cause loss of flavor, color, texture, and nutrients. The goal of blanching is not to cook the vegetable, but just to heat it throughout.

To blanch asparagus, use one gallon of boiling water for one pound of vegetables. Cut in 2-inch lengths or leave as spears. Put the vegetables into actively boiling water. Put the lid on the pan, wait for the water to return to a boil, and then start counting the blanching time. Blanching times: small stalks, 2 minutes; medium stalks, 3 minutes; large stalks, 4 minutes. As soon as blanching is complete, immediately plunge asparagus into 3 or 4 gallons of clean ice-cold water. Cool for the same amount of time recommended for blanching. Drain asparagus and package in airtight, moisture-proof containers.

For questions about safe home food preservation, or to schedule a speaker for organizations or clubs on the topics of food safety or food preservation, call the Master Food Preservers at (530) 621-5506.

For more information, be sure to go to the Master Food Preserver website at http://cecentralsierra.ucanr.org/Master_Food_Preservers/. Sign up to receive our Master Food Preservers E-Newsletter at <http://ucanr.org/mfpenews/>.