

EXTENSION CONNECTION – Amazing Asparagus

By: Paulelda Gilbert, ISU Extension Nutrition & Health Specialist

Q. Can you tell me about asparagus? What should I look for when purchasing?

A. Asparagus belongs to the lily family together with onions, leeks, and garlic. Its name comes from Greek and means "sprout" or "shoot". 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. It is grown in sunlight where photosynthesis makes its color green. The white asparagus is considered a delicacy in Europe. It costs almost twice that of green asparagus due to its limited supply. White asparagus is grown in the dark, thus requires specific procedure to yield its white color. Purple asparagus is deeply fruity flavored with 20% more sugar than the green and its purple color is due to an anthocyanin pigment.

Asparagus is at its peak of availability in April and May, but in the Midwest, the growing season extends from May through July. After harvesting, asparagus deteriorates rapidly unless it is kept cold. If you are purchasing asparagus in a store, it should be refrigerated or displayed on trays with the stalks standing in cold water. If you purchase asparagus from an outdoor market it should be shaded from the sun.

Purchasing fresh asparagus: For green asparagus, look for spears that are firm yet tender, with deep green or purplish tips that are close and compact. Partially open or wilted tips are signs of aging. Stalks should be straight with a rounded shape. Avoid flat or twisted stalks which are tough and stringy. Stalks that measure at least 1/2 inch in diameter at the base are usually preferable.

To store fresh asparagus: Wrap the bottoms in a damp paper towel and store in the crisper drawer in the refrigerator or in a plastic bag. It is best to eat asparagus as soon as possible, but it will keep in the refrigerator for four to five days.

Preparation of Fresh Asparagus: Wash in cool running water. Cut or break off any tough white ends. Cook asparagus quickly. Overdone asparagus is limp, discolored and

has a bitter taste. The cooked spears should be firm-tender so that you can pierce the ends with the point of a paring knife.

Methods of Preparation: Boil: 3 - 5 minutes, depending on thickness; Microwave: 5 - 7 minutes (depending on the amount); Stir-fry: 3 - 5 minutes.

Q. What is the nutritional value of asparagus?

A. Asparagus has many health beneficial properties. It has a positive effect on the kidneys, liver, and bowel by functioning as a natural diuretic and laxative. Therefore, the vegetable is helpful in reducing constipation, bowel disorders, and symptoms of diabetes. The vegetable contains glutathione, which is an antioxidant, and is believed to prevent some forms of cancer. Asparagus is rich in vitamin A, C, and E, and does contain folate and dietary fiber. The vegetable is free from fat and cholesterol.

For the serving size of 5.3 oz (about 5 spears), the following lists the nutrient content: Calories 20 kcal; Protein 3 g; Carbohydrate 3 g; Fat 0 g; Cholesterol 0 mg; Sodium 5 mg; Vitamin A 8 % of US-RDA; Vitamin C 20 % of US-RDA; Thiamin 15 % of US-RDA; Riboflavin 6 % of US-RDA; Niacin 6 % of US-RDA; Calcium 2% of US-RDA; Potassium 400 mg; Dietary Fiber 3 g; Vitamin B6 10 % of US-RDA; Folate 60 % of US-RDA .

Call me at the Webster County Extension Office, 576-2119 or e-mail pgilbert@iastate.edu, with your nutrition and health questions. You may also call our toll-free ISU Answerline at 1-800-262-3804.