

# An Improved Asparagus Variety in Canterbury

CONSIDERABLE interest is being taken by asparagus growers in Canterbury in an improved variety which was recently introduced from overseas. Over a number of years careful breeding and selection of both male and female plants were carried out to obtain a strain of a very high standard, and K.B.F. is the result. This improved variety, together with notes on cultural practices, is described in the following article by L. C. Hurdell, Horticultural Instructor, Department of Agriculture, Christchurch.

MANY people do not grow asparagus because they are under the impression that it requires special attention. Asparagus needs no better cultivation than do potatoes and cabbage, but two important factors in growing asparagus are the choice of a good strain and the selection of good, vigorous crowns. Best results cannot be achieved if weak crowns of a poor strain are planted.

K.B.F. strain was raised in England by Mr. A. W. Kidner after several generations of controlled breeding, both parents being rigidly selected. Grown under Canterbury conditions it has shown up as a very vigorous plant capable of producing a large number of well-formed, sturdy spears. The fern growth in the second year from planting reaches a height of 6ft. or more and is dense and compact. The root growth of 2-year-old crowns is tremendous, extending over an area of several square yards. The roots are thick and fleshy, showing capacity for food storage. Buds are large, numerous, and well formed. One-year-old crowns suitable for planting out have an excellent root system and a good supply of healthy buds.

## Preparation of Soil

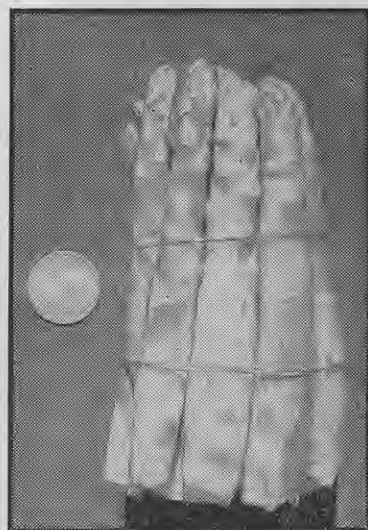
Asparagus will grow on a wide range of soils provided drainage is satisfactory. The plants will not tolerate "wet feet". Under good soil conditions and proper treatment a bed should produce profitable crops for many years. The incorporation of organic matter is important, as it

improves the moisture-holding capacity of the soil and provides a good supply of nutrients for the initial build-up of the crowns.

Green manure crops such as barley, oats, or lupins may be grown the season before planting to supply the necessary organic material, or fowl, sheep, or stable manure may be applied before preparation of the bed. The growing of cover crops may be difficult once asparagus is established, but farmyard or organic manures can be applied between the rows during winter. Fern growth should never be removed from the growing area. When it turns yellow in late autumn it may be cut and cultivated in to increase the humus content of the soil.

It is most important that land where asparagus is to be grown should be freed of troublesome weeds such as twitch, convolvulus, Californian thistle, and docks, as the eradication of these is difficult once the bed is established.

With commercial plantings in the Christchurch district, land which has previously been in pasture is often shallow or skim ploughed to assist the breakdown of the turf. Later a second ploughing is made to a depth of about 6in. to 7in., which allows the partially decomposed turf to be turned in deeper but still within the reach of soil micro-organisms that break it down. A third ploughing, to a depth of 2in. to 3in. greater than the normal planting depth of the crowns, is carried out before planting. The land can then be worked down to level it and obtain a reasonable tilth.



A 1lb. bunch of K.B.F. strain asparagus containing 12 spears. An indication of the size of spears is given by the penny at left.

In home gardens the preparation of asparagus beds consists of digging in plenty of bulky organic matter some months before planting. Light cultivations should be carried out periodically to reduce weed growths; then before planting, the bed should be dug to a depth of 10in. to 12in. and the soil cultivated to a reasonable tilth. Depth of cultivation will be governed by the depth of the soil.

## Planting Time and Distances

The general culture of K.B.F. strain does not vary greatly from that of any other variety, and whether planting is for the home garden or for commercial production it is essential to plant good crowns. Weak and spindly crowns cannot be expected to give good results even in the best of soils. Strong, healthy plants must always be chosen. One-year-old crowns are recommended for planting, as older plants of this variety may be difficult to handle because of the extent of their root systems.

For commercial gardens plants may be set out from August until about mid-September, but later planting is not recommended. Depth of planting will be governed by the type of soil, but normally crowns should be covered to a depth of 6in. to 8in. In light, sandy soils the deeper planting is advisable if the soil tends to dry out in summer. On heavy soils the depth of planting can be reduced.

Planting distances vary slightly in some districts, but the normal distances for this variety in Canterbury are 5ft. between rows and 2ft. apart in the rows. This will give approximately 4400 plants per acre. Each plant should be allowed not less than 8 sq. ft.



Left—Plant of K.B.F. asparagus 19 months from seed. Right—Base of plant of same age.