



Perennial Vegetables Outline

By Bruce Bennett

Why don't you know about perennial vegetables? They are not part of the North American gardening and farming traditions that were brought by European immigrants who had experience with only annual crops and had plowing livestock.

Whatever the origin, we shouldn't ignore these productive foods because, compared to annual crops, they tend to be more nutritious, easier to grow, more ecologically beneficial and less dependent on water and fertilizers.

Although there are hundreds of perennial veggie species across the globe, there are scant few of these plants that can be grown in our neck of the woods (USDA Zones 7 & 8). Here's a list of my top twenty (with a list of fifty on the GG 2.0 webpage).

Tonight, we'll hit just the 'Top Three' most popular ones: asparagus, rhubarb & artichoke

Asparagus

Asparagus is one of the most popular perennial vegetables in the garden. It grows well in our Pacific Northwest climate, especially in the Columbia Basin area.

History: 5,000 BC – Egypt; 3,000 BC - Greece, 30 BC – Rome, 1600s – Europe, 1700s - America

Soil Preparation: Best time to prep the soil – when you create a new planting bed

Location – All-day sun on the north side of the garden.

Moisture – Good drainage is critical.

Amendments – Add 3" – 6" of compost or well-rotted manure; bone meal; lime, if needed for pH of 6.0 – 6.7.

Time: Try to prep the soil in autumn and allow the amendments to meld over winter.

Asparagus needs at least two to three years to become established in the garden before you harvest a single spear.

Year Zero: Crowns vs. seeds (40 – 50 plants for family of four)

Year One: Do not harvest any spears.

Year Two: Harvest for 1 – 2 weeks.

Year Three: Harvest for 3 – 4 weeks.

Year Four & Beyond: Harvest 5 – 6 weeks.

Varieties: Washington Series (Male & female plants) vs. Jersey Series (all-male plants)
Higher yields & greater disease resistance

Traditional Varieties — **Washington series (Mary, Martha, Waltham)** which are dioecious (male & female)

New All-Male Varieties — ‘**Jersey Giant**’ and ‘**Jersey Knight**’ offer proven higher yields and increased rust resistance and tolerance to fusarium crown rot and are often the preferred choice. ‘**Jersey Jewel**’, ‘**Jersey King**,’ and ‘**Jersey General**’ (green spears with purple bracts) have excellent resistance to crown rot (fusarium). Purple varieties are becoming **popular because of their color impact in the garden and they are sweeter and tenderer** than green asparagus. Good in salads.

Asparagus Pests:

Slugs and snails (use good sanitation, bait traps, copper barriers, iron phosphate)

Crioceris or Asparagus Beetles: Common Asparagus Beetle and Spotted Asparagus Beetle (use good sanitation, hand-pick)

Diseases: Crown Rot (sanitation, spacing & good drainage) & Asparagus Rust (plant resistant cultivars; sanitation, sulfur products)

Rhubarb

Rhubarb - a plant with an identity problem. **Scientifically, it's a vegetable** (produces external seeds). For culinary purposes, it is used as a fruit.

A mature plant can easily reach a height of 2-1/2 to 3 feet high and 3 to 3-1/2 feet wide. Like asparagus, they need room to grow. Undivided plant will last 10 years or so. Plants that are divided every 3 – 5 years can last 50+ years

History: 1700s – America; the ‘Pie Plant’

Right Plant, Right Place: Rhubarb grows best where the average temperature is less than 75°F, but, requires a minimum temperature of 40°F to break dormancy. Washington is the largest producer of rhubarb in the nation.

Varieties: Two basic groups, those with red stalks (sweeter & tenderer) and those with green stalks (larger & more vigorous). Green ‘Victoria’ and red ‘Crimson Red/Canada Red’ top the popularity charts.

Soil Preparation: A rich, well-drained, sandy loam with a soil pH of 6.0 to 6.8 is ideal for rhubarb production.

Soil Amendments: Apply 3” – 4” of compost to the planting bed. If soil tests to a pH below 6.0, add 3 – 4 pounds of lime per 50 sq. ft. After that first year, adding a layer of compost 2 to 3 inches thick each year will provide a continuous source of nutrients to the plants

Irrigation: Once established, rhubarb is very hardy and can withstand drought conditions. Rhubarb grown in areas that are cool and rainy may not need additional irrigation until after the first harvest.

Propagation: Crown division is the recommended method of rhubarb propagation, usually by Year Five.

Planting: The crown pieces are planted 10 inches deep with the crown 1 – 2- inches below the soil surface and 3 to 4 feet apart. In general, grow four plants for a family of four.

Flowers & Bolting: Seed stalks frequently emerge or “bolt” from rhubarb crowns. Remove them if you want greater yields next year

Harvesting: A normal harvest season of mature plants lasts about 8 weeks, April/May and early July. Like asparagus, do not harvest the first year after planting. Year Two – 1 or 2, Year Three 3 – 5 weeks, and Year Four+ 4 - 6 weeks. Allow rhubarb to regrow from late July onward without being harvested

Pests: Weeds: It does not grow as well in a weedy environment.

Pests: Slugs & Snails: The worse time for slugs is when the new stands of rhubarb stalks emerge. (Good garden sanitation, hand-pick, bait traps, copper barriers, iron phosphate)

Pests: Insects: Rhubarb is not usually seriously affected by insect pests. Rhubarb Weevil/*Curculio (Lixus concavus)* occasionally do occur (sanitation, hand-picking, remove weeds)

DISEASES: Crown Rot (sanitation, improve drainage & airflow, remove diseased plants, copper or sulfur fungicides)

DISEASES: Downy Mildew (improve air flow, copper spray)

Artichoke

Last perennial vegetable is the lowly thistle. Known in the botanical world as *Cynara scolymus* and, in the epicurean world, as ... the Artichoke

The artichoke grows up to be a silvery-grey fountain some 6’ – 7’ tall and about as wide. It produces tasty flower buds which are eaten before they open and bloom. With a life span of five-to-ten years, they are not as long-lived as the asparagus. But, even five years isn’t a

bad return from a single planting! And, Artichokes are reported to contain the highest level of antioxidants of all vegetables!

This vegetable grows to (5–7ft) tall, with silvery, green leaves . The flowers develop in a large head from an edible bud about (3–6”) diameter with numerous triangular scales; the individual florets are purple. The edible portions of the buds consist primarily of the fleshy lower portions of the bracts and the base, known as the "heart"; the mass of immature florets in the center of the bud is called the "choke" or beard. These are inedible as the flowers mature and bloom. Plan on four to six plants for a family of four.

History: 1700s – America, Washington and Jefferson’s gardens

Also, Spanish settlers introduced globe artichokes to California. Today, nearly 100% of the globe artichokes grown in the United States are from Monterey County, in California.

Propagation: As with asparagus, artichokes can be produced from seeds or vegetatively from divisions or root cuttings (basal side shoots). Research has shown better harvests coming from the use of divisions.

Culture: Artichokes require good soil (with a pH of 6.5 – 7.5), regular watering and feeding, and, possibly, a bit of winter protection (below USDA Zone 7).

Pests: Insects - Artichoke Plume Moth mainly a problem in California's central coast (*Bacillus thuringiensis*)

Pests: Insects - Artichoke Aphid (Neem oil, Pyrethrin)

Pests: Gastropods - Slugs & Snails – Like young leaves (sanitation, hand-pick, bait traps, copper barriers, iron phosphate)

Diseases: Crown Rot (improve drainage, avoid overhead irrigation)

Diseases: Powdery Mildew – (avoid overhead irrigation; copper or sulfur fungicide)

Varieties: Greens - Big Heart, Emerald, Green Globe, Imperial Star.

Purples - Opera, (Purple of) Romagna, Violetta, Violet de Provence

All will perennialize in areas above USDA Zone 7.

As with most perennial vegetables that have been around for hundreds, if not thousands, of years, there are many ways to prepare this ‘great thistle’. The simplest method is steaming or boiling and serving them with melted butter. But you can also find recipes to grill them, pickle them, roast them, sauté, or (my favorite) stuff them.

No matter which method you prefer, artichokes can both beautify your garden and satisfy your taste buds.