



# *The Belgian asparagus*



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## ITS ORIGINS :

Some historians pretend seeing the representation of asparagus on the walls of a pyramid in Saqqara in Egypt, meaning that its tillage would date from more than 5000 years B.C.

Anyway, it's established that the Greeks used wild asparagus "asparagus officinalis" with the fine therapeutic ones. Hippocrate, for example, alleged that the asparagus root appeared very effective against dysentery and lumbago. Moreover, the Greeks recognized with asparagus aphrodisiac and contraceptive virtues. That is why they dedicated this plant to Aphrodite, goddess of love.

The Romans invented the tillage of asparagus, that they held for a product of great luxury because of the smoothness of its taste, but also of the properties which were allotted to it. They consumed asparaguses raw, smoked or cooked.

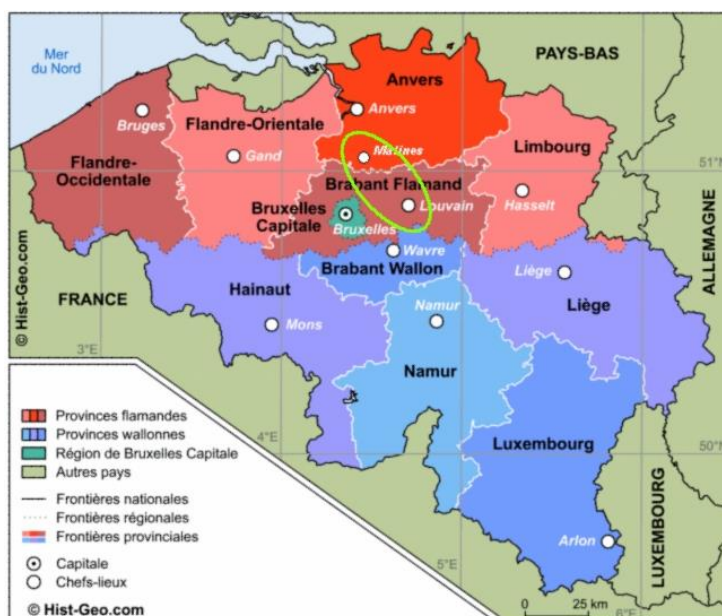
The Middle Ages are a hollow period for the tillage of asparagus considered as too difficult and complicated.

During the Renaissance, the Medici gave asparagus its noble letters again, then the Kings of France went to Italy to make war, and finally Charles V launched the fashion of the "Flemish asparagus" recipe. It was the beginning of a great tradition.

But it is in the 19th century that the tillage of asparagus knew its apex, thanks to the invention of modern tillage methods that enabled it to seat on the tables of the Belgian middle-class when our country was one of the richest in the world.

Produced almost exclusively in the Flemish part of our country, especially in the area of Malines and Louvain, Belgian asparaguses, especially the white ones, were famous, from the 17th century to the 1960s.

Then, the tillage of asparagus in Flanders decreased due to important taxations on this product considered as luxurious, with the competing imports coming from Asia, Greece and Italy and with the important work required to product quality asparagus. The market-gardeners preferred turning to the production of chicory or cauliflower, more profitable and less tiring.



But, since the end of the 1980s, one witnesses a renewed interest of the consumers for the traditional top quality products, also the production in Flanders resurrected but is not yet sufficient to meet the needs. The Belgian asparagus remains thus extremely expensive.

## ITS FARMING :

The asparagus (*Asparaguses officinalis* L., Liliaceous) is a rustic vegetable which can reach 1.5m height. It is also long-lived thanks to its underground parts, and tolerates all climate types but with a preference for the sunny places. Cold and wet grounds should be avoided. Among all asparaguses, we find more or less the late or early ones, which can make it possible to spread out its harvest.



What one calls “claws of asparagus” is actually the whole root. Starting from these claws are the stems emitted, called “turions” or “asparagus spear”.

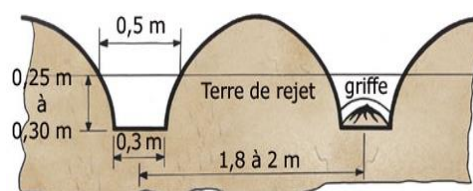
Harvesting needs patience. After waiting theoretically during 3 years, harvests are done annually during 10 to 15 years.

The soil around Malines is conducive to the tillage of asparagus because its claws particularly like sandy grounds, which are heated quickly. But they can also be satisfied with a more classical ground.

### How to plant the claws ?

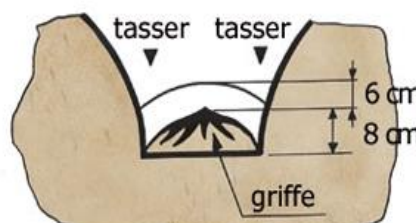
*Start by preparing your soil in autumn:*

- Trench of approximately 25-30 cm depth, over a width of 30 cm, separated every 1.80 to 2.00 m.
- Leave the ground extracted between the trenches.
- Loosen (without turning over) the bottom of the trench and add basic compost and fertilizer.



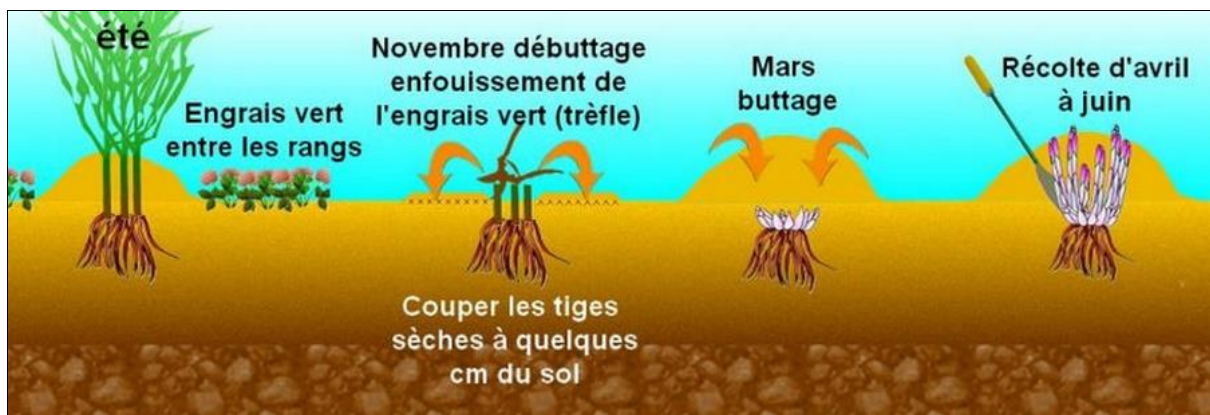
*At the time of the plantation of the claws, the following spring:*

- Realize at the bottom of the trench small earth hillocks, approximately 8 cm height every 60-80 cm.
- Plant a tutor, which will allow to locate the site but also to attach the frail stems during the first years.
- On each one of these small hillocks, deposit a claw, with the central bud at the top, and spread out the roots well around. Shorten those which are too long.
- Recover the bottom of the trench with 10 cm fine earth; the claws are then covered very thinly (2 or 3 cm), the time for the plant to acclimatize to the soil.
- During this first year, the plant will gently accommodate.



## Control of the tillage

- The second year, fill the trench with the earth remaining on the edges.
- During the first three years:
  - Harrow and weed regularly to hold the edges free from weeds.
  - Tie the frail stems to the tutors.
- As from the third year, in spring:
  - Assemble a hillock of ground from 30 to 50 cm (this operation is useless for green asparagus or crimsons) and bring a natural fertilizer rich in phosphorus and potash.
  - After harvesting, put mulching, attach the stems to their tutor.
  - At the end of the autumn, cut the dried stems. Level the hillocks and put compost on the ground.



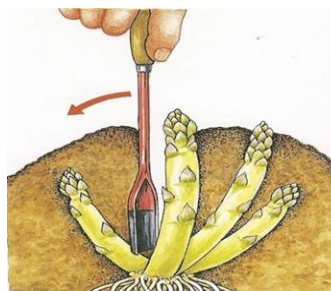
## Harvest from April to June (in open ground)

- In the third year, it is possible to collect only 1 or 2 "turions" or "asparagus spears".
- From the fourth year a normal harvest is possible. Only 60% of the "turions" are harvested; it is indeed necessary to let the others develop and make leaves which will regenerate the foot and will be harvested the following year (leave at least 3 or 4 stems per tuft).
- Do not collect them too young, "turions" must measure at least 1 cm thick.
- The white asparagus is collected as soon as it rises above the ground, the violet when it emerges from a few cm, the green one is gathered when it measures about fifteen cm.



## Harvest Technique

- Cut the white ones at their base using a gouge, by carrying out a lever movement.
- Cut the green ones or crimsons by hand, by carrying out a twist moveme.



## ASPARAGUS VARIETIES

There exist, according to the norms set by the European Union, four varieties of these liliaceous of the lily and leek family: white asparagus, green asparagus, the violet and green asparagus and the violet asparagus.

The asparagus colouring depends primarily on the tillage mode:



**The white asparagus**, most traditional (70% of the production), is produced in “ridged” tillage, safe from air and light (one recovers asparagus with earth as it grows).



**The asparagus with violet tip** (20% of the production) bores the earth hillock: the tip then takes a mauve or violet colour. Its flavour is generally close to that of the white asparagus.



**The green asparagus** (approximately 10% of the total production) does not require ridging. It grows in open air, and owes its colouring with a process of chlorophyll synthesis, which occurs under the action of the light. Its colour is then uniformly green (standard green asparagus “Californian”) and its taste, marked, a little different from that of white asparaguses.



Lastly, the asparagus known as “**green-violet**”, semi ridged, whose stem remains white (the standard requires that a third at least of the asparagus be green-coloured)

## RECIPE OF THE FLEMISH ASPARAGUS

The “Flemish asparagus” is a traditional simple and greedy recipe.

### **Ingredients (4 people)**

- 12 white asparaguses
- 4 eggs
- 4 soup spoons chopped flat parsley
- 100 g butter
- 1 pinch of nutmeg
- Salt & fresh ground pepper



### **Preparation:**

- Cook your soft-boiled eggs, that is to say approximately 5 minutes starting from boiling.
- Once cooked, brown the eggs at room temperature while passing them under cool water then peel them. Finally, in a bowl, crush eggs with the fork and book.
- Chop parsley and book.
- Peel the asparaguses (see the technique in next chapter).
- Tie up the asparaguses and bunch them by ten (that protects the tip which is more fragile) then cook them in a salted boiling water (see the technique in next chapter). It’s ideal is to check the cooking using a knife point. When easily inserted to the centre of the asparagus with just small resistance, it is cooked.
- Drain your asparaguses then remove the moisture surplus by posing them on a tissue. While your asparaguses rest, dissolve butter in a small pan at a low heat.

### **Dressing:**

Pour in your bowl egg, parsley, melted butter, a small amount of nutmeg, salt and pepper then mix delicately.

Put your asparaguses at tepid heat on plates and nap the whole of the egg-parsley-butter mixture. Accompany the whole with a tasty Trappist beer.



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## HOW TO CLEAN ASPARAGUS?

The stems are extremely fibrous and it is thus necessary to remove the external part of the asparagus. You can peel with a very sharpened knife, but it is preferable to adopt the peeler. Leave the knife's tip below towards the thickest end while taking care not breaking the delicate stem.

With a peeler, the best way is to put the asparagus flat at the table's edge, and to peel from the tip to the root while supporting: this method is fast and if you move the device in a quite rectilinear way, you are not likely to break the stem.



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## HOW TO ARMONIZE ASPARAGUSES?

Cleaning the asparagus is not enough, it is also necessary to cut it in length and to put it in bunch : it is what one invites to avoid.

According to whether you choose to have less possible fibres or not, there are two methods to remove the end.

First case:

You choose to have all asparaguses with an equal length without worrying about the length of the fibrous part. In this case, take ten asparaguses that you arrange in order to have all the tips with the same height. Roll a string, preferably out of cotton, around the bunch while taking care to have sufficient free length on the cut side. When all the bunches are made, cut them all again at the same length with a very sharpened knife: pay attention not to break a "turion", cross prudently.

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## VARIOUS ASPARAGUS COOKING METHODS

### Asparagus boiling [English method]

There are several alternatives. The easiest and fastest is simply to boil asparagus; bunch them or not, in salt water. The disadvantage is that the hard and fibrous parts boil in the same way than the tip which is much more tender. For this reason you can erect the asparagus bundles vertically with the tips out of the water: the stems boil with water and the tips steam. To check the boiling stage, prick in one of the tips with a kitchen knife: if it enters like in butter, the boiling is ready. According to the variety and the gauge of the asparagus, that can take from 15 to 22 minutes, if the asparagus are immersed in boiling salt water. It is preferable to start cooking in boiling water, in this way flavours remain imprisoned in the vegetable and are not diluted in the cooking water.



### Asparagus steaming

Steaming preserves best the vitamins, but part of the flavour is involved in the vapours. You can of course use water aromatised with fish, or the meat in the liquid which generates the vapour, but the management of flavours is increasingly more delicate than by boiling. Use asparagus of the same diameter because the boiling times differ depending on the gauge. Depending on the size and the variety of asparagus, the time of steaming varies from 12 to 18 minutes.

### Asparagus cooking in asparagus cooker

As the asparagus-cooker is based on steaming for the tips and cooking for the stems, the advantages dominate and the disadvantages are suppressed. The use of baskets removes the drudgery of bunching; you spare some time.

Depending on the diameter, the cooking time varies from 8 to 18 min.



### Asparagus cooking in the frying pan

It is a hardly used method, that best emphasizes the flavours of the green asparagus: melt a piece of butter and slowly cook asparagus cut in dices until they are tender. Nothing prevent you from using a good quality oil, even of olive; the method is well appropriate for the green asparagus. You can also bleach asparagus five minutes with boiling water before cooking them with the frying pan.

Time of cooking: approximately 10 minutes, check cooking with a knife's tip.

### Asparagus cooking in the oven

Bleach asparagus not before charging them with or without papillote, decorated with cheese, butter, lemon or other perfumes. It is an interesting means to revisit, to create alternatives of the recipe. Cooking time: 15 to 20 min at 180°C; 15 min at 220°C.

These times can vary a little depending on the size of the asparagus.

### Asparagus cooking in the microwave oven

It is the fastest way to cook asparagus: lay them in a pyrex dish, add some water in the bottom, salt copiously and put a little lemon juice to prevent from blackening. Put a micro-perforated film for microwave oven to prevent from drying.

Cooking time, depending on the size, varies from 7 to 8 minutes.