

May 2018 - Vol.4 No.5



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Vegetable Grafting for Healthier Plants and Better Yields

By Ralph Morini | May 2018 - Vol.4 No.5



My first exposure to grafting was to “help” my grandfather graft some fruit trees on the estate where he was gardener. And I laughed as a young man when an uncle created a “frankentree” by grafting several different varieties of maple branches to a single backyard maple tree. Whether done for practical reasons or for fun, grafting is an ancient art that has recently become a widespread and growing practice in the American vegetable gardening world. Why? The photo above shows a grafted heirloom tomato plant on the left and the same variety grown from seed on the right. (Courtesy of Royal Horticultural Society). That’s why. Keep reading to learn how.

History and Benefits

The practice involves selecting a rootstock, a plant variety that offers disease resistance and vigorous growth qualities, to be the in-ground portion of the plant. Then grafting it to a **scion** with desirable fruit characteristics to be the above-ground part. Properly executed, the best qualities of both varieties result. Resistance to soil borne diseases and pests without the use of chemical fumigants is one claimed benefit. A more vigorous plant with significant increases in fruit production is another. Commercial greenhouse growers and space-limited home gardeners who can’t rotate crops as a disease deterrent are potential beneficiaries. So are hydroponic growers wanting higher outputs and home gardeners who love the taste of heirloom tomatoes but are frustrated by soil borne disease and pest damage to their favorite older cultivars.

Several vegetable varieties, including nightshades and cucurbits, are commonly grafted commercially in the

U.S. now. Tomatoes are probably the most common. Grafting a disease-resistant rootstock to a non-resistant but desirable scion, like a Brandywine, can make a critical difference in yield for a commercial grower and help a home gardener avoid the disappointment of disease or nematode damage to a favorite summer vegetable.

The earliest known references to vegetable grafting go back to fifth century China. Development advanced in East Asian countries due to intensive cultivation on limited arable land. By the early twentieth century, grafting of watermelon and cucumber was common in Japan. In the U.S. early vegetable grafting took place in the southern states during the 1930s and 1940s where tomato scions were grafted to jimson weed root stocks to combat regional disease and stress issues. In recent years, large scale greenhouse production with grafted plants has provided improved yield and product quality, and the practice has spread. It is estimated that 40 million grafted tomato plants will be grown in the U.S. this year, predominantly by commercial growers.

While home gardeners can participate by purchasing grafted plants from seed suppliers or retail garden centers, the adventurous among us can purchase rootstock seed and supplies and try our hand at home grafting. Let's use tomato grafting as our example.

Rootstocks are the Key

Picking seeds for the scion for grafted plants is easy. Choose the variety you want to consume. Rootstocks are less obvious, and they have different characteristics and influences on plant vigor and output. Typical rootstocks are tomato varieties that are just this side of wild. Their fruits are not considered edible. They are classified as **Generative**, focusing energy on root growth, or **Vegetative**, adding above ground growth, stress tolerance and a longer season to the plant. A few of the more common rootstocks now available are:

- **Estamino**: a generative stock that balances vegetative growth and fruit production and is recommended for smaller fruited varieties
- **Maxifort**: a vegetative stock that provides strong plant vigor and is recommended for larger fruiting varieties
- **Supernatural**: a vegetative stock with good disease and nematode resistance and high stress tolerance.

There are over 70 tomato rootstocks available with different qualities and resistances. Know your local conditions and the scion you want in order to make the best choice.

Grafting Techniques

The basic technique for growing your own grafted tomatoes is straightforward. Start by purchasing your selected rootstock seed as well as seed for your favorite home grown tomato. Plant them simultaneously, or maybe give the rootstock, which tend to have thin stems, a couple of days headstart. The goal is to graft plants having the same diameter when the stems are 3-4 inches tall with stems about 1/16"-1/8" in diameter and with 2-4 true leaves. Typical time from planting to grafting is 14-21 days. Obviously there is some judgement involved but equal diameter trumps the other variables.

When the plants are ready, choose one of three proven grafting techniques:

- **Splice Grafting**, also known as top, tube or slant-cut grafting. This is the most widely used technique because it is quick and simple. Cut the rootstock and scion at matching angles. Recommended angle ranges from 35-60 degrees; it is the match that is critical. Clamp them together with a grafting clip, of which there are multiple styles available. The silicon clip in the photo below is slid halfway down over the rootstock and the matching scion section is slid into it making the most complete possible contact between the two cut edges.



Splice-grafting of a tomato, showing angled incisions on rootstock and scion stems. Photo: WSU Extension Fact Sheet FS052E, Vegetable Grafting



Splice-grafted tomato showing insertion of scion into clip to complete union. Photo: WSU Extension Fact Sheet FS052E, Vegetable Grafting

- **Cleft Grafting:** This technique involves cutting the rootstock horizontally, removing the top of the plant, and then making a ¼-inch vertical cut down the center of the stem. Then cut the scion tip into a matching wedge to be inserted into the rootstock incision. Hold it together with a spring clip or grafting film. This technique holds the graft together more tightly than a splice graft, so a film wrap can be used to secure the union. It is more time consuming and difficult to execute, however, and the wedge can split the rootstock stem if it is too wide. The technique can also be inverted with the root stock trimmed to a wedge point and the scion v-notched to fit over the wedge. This version is called a **Saddle Graft**.



Cleft grafted tomato sections to be joined and clipped

Photo: Royal Horticultural Society

- **Side Grafting:** Also called tongue or side-by-side grafting, this technique involves cutting matching 45° wedge-shaped incisions $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way through the rootstock and scion stems. The “tongues” formed are then joined so that the cut surfaces are in contact. The graft is secured with a spring clip or grafting film and left together for 5 days. On days 6 through 8, the rootstock top and scion root section are progressively severed until the two are completely separated. This technique has a high success rate because the scion can take moisture through its root system during the healing process. Larger plants can be used and stems can have slightly different diameters. Disadvantages are that the rootstock and scion must be transplanted into a common container prior to the graft and the incisions are more difficult to make. Don't mix up rootstock and scion plants or the results are sure to disappoint.



Illustration of side grafting incisions and joined graft, prior to clipping

Photo: Rodale's Organic Life and Plant Grafting.com

Additional Advice

While there are several different grafting practices commonly used, basic technique follows similar steps. We already discussed matching stem sizes and cut angles. Here is additional guidance:

- Cut both plants just above cotyledons. Leave the top two leaves on the scion, pinch off other leaves to focus the plant on healing rather than respiration. Graft within a few minutes of cutting to prevent cut surfaces from drying out.
- Success will be less than 100% so seed and graft more plants than you want to ultimately plant in the garden.
- Water rootstock and scion 24 hours before grafting and water gently immediately after grafting.
- Sterilize everything involved in the process: sanitize hands, use clean, sharp razor blades for cutting, sterilize clips if reusing them.
- Prepare a "healing chamber" to house the just-grafted plants. It should be warm (80-85° F.), dark/shaded and humid. For the home gardener, a simple approach is to cover a container garden with a plastic bag. Spray the interior surfaces prior to placing the plants inside. Don't disturb for two days. Open to add moisture on day 3. Open again on day 5, expose to air for 30 minutes, re-humidify and close. Increase the open exposure to 1 hour and 6-8 hours on days 6 and 7, adding moisture prior to closing each time. On day 8 remove the plants from the chamber. Specific times may vary with local conditions, but the principle is to slowly acclimatize the grafted plants to avoid permanent wilting.
- If the plant wilts in the first 48 hours, the graft has failed.

Transplanting

Usually the scion and rootstock establish a vascular connection in about 7 days. However it takes

approximately 14 days for the union to fully heal. After removal from the healing chamber, allow the plants to rest in a greenhouse environment for a couple of days and then harden them off for 5 to 7 days prior to field planting. Watch the plants' progress and minimize stress prior to final planting.

Wind is a grafted plant's enemy. Leaving the clips on plants can protect against wind. Or clips can be replaced with a film wrap. Film and silicone clips will drop off as the plant grows and spring clips can be removed after a couple of weeks as the graft strengthens. Support the young plants with a bamboo skewer or toothpick if warranted.

A caution: the graft joint should be above the soil line. If it is buried, the scion may root into the soil and undermine the soil borne disease benefits of the grafting process.

Care and Maintenance

Grafted plants are typically vigorous growers. They require regular pruning to prevent undesirable rootstock growth while focusing the plant's energy on scion growth and fruit production. At the least, trim leaves and shoots below the lowest fruit cluster. There is some guidance that claims that a vigorous grafted tomato plant only requires about 10-12 fully unfolded leaves for maximum fruit production.

Make, Buy or Eat?

The grafted vegetable movement is here to stay. It provides the benefits of hybrids without the long process of genetic hybridization with no compromise in fruit variety and it boosts output. We are all eating grafted vegetables. The question is whether we want to go further and purchase grafted plants or try our hand at home grafting.

Rootstock seed costs about 50¢ a seed and clips are 15-50¢ each, depending on type. For a small home gardener, the self-grafting investment is more in time than cost. Grafted plants cost 3 or 4 times what a typical non-grafted transplant costs, but again for a small number of plants, the total outlay is reasonable given the increased yield expectations. The growth of grafted vegetable cultivation speaks to its legitimacy, for commercial and home growers, for tomatoes, pepper, eggplant, squash, cucumber and melons. Check your seed catalog and favorite garden centers and decide which part of the wave you want to ride.

Sources:

"Graft is Good," *Iowa Gardener Magazine* (Carol Michel, 10/16/13), statebystategardening.com/state.php/ia/print/graft_is_good

"Grafting for Disease Resistance in Heirloom Tomatoes," North Carolina Coop. Ext., ces.ncsu.edu/grafting-for-disease-resistance-in-heirloom-tomatoes

"Grafting Vegetables," Royal Horticultural Society, www.rhs.org.uk/advice/profile?PID=825

"Vegetable Grafting: History, Use, and Current Technology Status in North America," *HortScience* hortsci.ashspublications.org/content/43/6/1664.full (October 2008. vol. 43 no. 6 1664-1669).

Introducing May-Blooming Natives into Ornamental Gardens

By Melanie | May 2018 - Vol.4 No.5



“April showers bring May flowers.” This old saying holds true in both nature and in ornamental garden beds, yet this year we might well have said “April SNOW showers bring May flowers.” Will the cold weather that has lingered through April deter the anticipated May blooms? A late spring chill — especially when temperatures drop into the twenties after a period of warmth — can definitely harm perennials. That’s because plants that break dormancy are more susceptible to late frost damage because of their new, tender growth. Fortunately, most plants survive this type of cold injury. Snow can preserve plants by insulating them, but dry cold can be much more damaging. Keep this in mind when precious new foliage and buds emerge, and cover them up when temperatures in the 20’s are predicted. Hopefully you didn’t put away your winter wardrobe yet and have handy a suitable wrap!

May-blooming Natives to Add to Your Garden My background in prehistoric America has led me to encourage gardeners to try plants that have been utilized for thousands of years. I hope more and more of us will give them a place in our ornamental gardens. They deserve to delight us with their beauty and history. It’s possible that by adding them to our gardens, we can act as curators of local native plants, thus assuring their future existence. Yet please do not eat them or take them from their natural habitats. Native plants can be purchased through several nurseries in Virginia, and you’ll find a handy list of native plant nurseries at the website of the Virginia Native Plant Society, vnps.org/plant-nurseries. Want to try some May bloomers in your garden? Here’s a list of natives you might want to try.

Jack-in-the-pulpit (*Arisaema triphyllum*), also known as Indian turnip

A very special lady pointed out this plant to me last summer, soon after I had been hired to garden at her historic and magical estate. This mysterious creature was hidden in the shadows, growing between her many majestic boxwoods. She firmly told me to never pull this plant out of the ground; it rarely grew any longer on her property, however, this one returned every year. Her passion and the features of this native plant led me to revisit a college course on Celtic society. The Gauls were early Celtic people that lived throughout England, France, and Germany. The Romans chased them into Scotland and Ireland. According to ancient stories, they hid from the Romans, often in forests and trees, which made them appear smaller, like fairy folk. The Celts called their hidden world a word pronounced like “sheath.” Needless to say it took me a year to remember what the plant was called — “Jack-in-the-pulpit.” I really couldn’t picture it, yet all summer long I was more than careful not to pull out any plants with three leaves, except poison ivy.



Photo by Jean M. Fogle

Jack-in-the-pulpit is a mystical guy that can also be a girl. The flower is hidden in the sheath, leaf bract, or spathe, which will dry up and shrivel away revealing vibrant red berries (fruit) in fall. Although it’s ancient, this plant seems to be evolving into an insect-eating plant.

Bugs get trapped in the base while looking for nectar and are unable to climb out on the slippery sides of the flower stem, which is called a spadix. A spadix is type of spike inflorescence which consists of a fleshy stem covered with flowers. Spadices are typical of the family Araceae, to which Jack-in-the-pulpit belongs.

Arisaema triphyllum grows in the shade and in organic moist soils (pH 4.5-6).

Before you try adding it to your garden, be sure you have the conditions it requires: constantly moist soil rich in organic matter. It can self-sow, or its corms (bulb-like bottoms) can be dug up and divided. The Native Americans used this plant to treat colds and coughs as well as in poultices for boils and snake bites. It is poisonous and should not be used for medicinal purposes except by an expert, and that goes for any plant.



See the spadix rising out of the center of this Jack-in-the-pulpit? Photo: Ivo Shandor.

Digital Resources for Jack-in-the-pulpit:

<https://www.nybg.org/blogs/plant-talk/2013/06/science/jack-in-the-pulpit-pollination-by-deception/>

https://www.chesapeakebay.net/S=0/fieldguide/critter/jack_in_the_pulpit

https://www.fs.fed.us/wildflowers/plant-of-the-week/arisaema_triphyllum.shtml

<https://viriniawildflowers.org/2015/05/01/jack-in-the-pulpit/>

Eastern red columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*)



Aquilegia canadensis
Photo courtesy of Dancing Goose.

Aquilegia canadensis is sometimes referred to as Eastern columbine, Eastern red columbine, or as simply wild columbine. It's worth noting that this columbine is native to our area and much of the eastern half of North America, and is not to be confused with the columbine found west of the Mississippi, *Aquilegia caerulea* (Rocky Mountain columbine). Its name apparently comes from *aquila*, the Latin word for eagle, and its spurs do resemble talons. The word columbine comes from the Latin word for dove, and it is indeed a peaceful plant despite its spurs. This species has many other common names, such as "meeting house" and "rock bells." This latter name is perhaps related to the fact that it is often found on cliffs and rocky slopes.

Aquilegia canadensis is found in diverse habitats, from rocky areas to shady deciduous woodlands. Because it's so adaptable, it is easy to grow, and is highly recommended for home gardens. It will thrive in well-drained moist soils, pH 5.5-6.5, and can tolerate drought.

Columbine self sows quite easily. In fact, it is said that they exhaust themselves producing an abundance of flowers, pollen, and seeds to ensure their future survival. Perhaps they could be considered the native volunteer plant. Nevertheless, they are easy to pull up, and can be easily discouraged from spreading into other beds or the lawn. I have a native columbine that is pink and white that I purchased from Monticello's garden shop, and it grows wildly in the yard. I am frequently asked by neighbors to pull the reins on these hardy guys. On the other hand, when I work in native gardens that have the space for these plants to colonize, it is a rewarding experience to watch columbine thrive. The Eastern red columbine is a huge hummingbird attractor, so if you enjoy watching hummingbirds, this is the plant to introduce into your garden! It also hosts the larvae of Columbine Duskywing butterfly and feeds other butterflies, bees, and the hawk moth.

Digital resources for Eastern red columbine:

<https://viriniawildflowers.org/2015/04/25/eastern-red-columbine/>

<https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/all/aquilegia-canadensis/>

https://www.fs.fed.us/wildflowers/pollinators/pollinator-of-the-month/hawk_moths.shtml

<https://www.fs.fed.us/wildflowers/pollinators/pollinator-of-the-month/columbine-duskywing.shtml>

Butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*), also known as butterfly milkweed, chigger weed and pleurisy root



Butterfly weed
Photo: Sterling Herron

This plant is a host to the monarch butterfly larvae. The monarch butterfly is the only butterfly known to fly south for the winter as birds do. Most butterflies' larvae can survive winter, but monarchs are tropical and must return to California or Mexico for their species to survive. *Asclepias tuberosa* could be seen vibrantly growing along roadsides years ago in shades of yellow to deep orange. This plant has now almost disappeared due to heavy use of herbicides for highway maintenance. Commercial farmers are also depleting this plant with their use of chemicals too.

Butterfly weed is known to have been used by the Native Americans for a variety of things from clothing to medicinal teas. The American colonists used it for chest pain and it was listed as a pharmaceutical until 1936. During World War II, the down from the milkweed was used for parachute suits because it is more buoyant than a cork, so it was safer when landing in water. Butterfly weed is an excellent plant to introduce into your garden. It is a superb way to liven up some beds and give a special butterfly a safe journey home for the winter.

I have had difficulty growing this plant from seed, even when trying a cold moist stratification for 3-6 weeks as suggested by expert growers, so you'll probably have better luck with transplants. Once butterfly weed becomes established, it is easy to maintain. It prefers dry, sunny open fields and a pH of 5-7. You can make a monarch sanctuary by creating a meadow in an area on your lawn (perhaps somewhere you do not like to mow). Other wild flowers can be incorporated into this area as well. This could be gratifying, knowing you helped the monarchs fly home, not to mention the charm in watching all the wildlife play and thrive in your backyard!

Digital Resources for Butterfly Weed:

<https://viriniawildflowers.org/2015/06/22/butterfly-weed/>

https://www.fs.fed.us/wildflowers/plant-of-the-week/ascleias_tuberosa.shtml

<https://www.fws.gov/savethemonarch/>

https://www.fs.fed.us/wildflowers/pollinators/Monarch_Butterfly/migration/index.shtml

<https://www.monarchwatch.org/milkweed/prop.htm>

Purple Passionvine (*Passiflora incarnata*)

This vine is also known as the maypop because it makes this sound when you step on it. It can be seen growing in a field on the Rivanna trail. I find it to be just as interesting if not less invasive than the native wisteria. I have included this rather exotic blooming vine because I rarely see it in gardens and wanted to recognize its grace. The name comes from the symbolism of the number five associated with Christianity. The fruit is edible and is made into jams and juices. The Cherokee used it as a poultice for inflammation. It is also used to soothe anxiety in Europe. Again, only buy native plants from reputable sources and never dig them up or pick them from their natural habitat. Please recognize that the information about these plants in terms of their medicinal properties comes from credible sources as shown in the references, yet it is strongly advised to never eat them unless you are an expert or under the supervision of a qualified practitioner.



Purple Passionvine. Photo by Nona Kaplan, Rivanna Trail.

An easy way to mark the beginning of our planting and growing season is Mother's Day. Up until then, we gardeners have to wait to begin sowing seeds for bountiful blooming flowers. Try to remember that "good things come to those who wait." Nature has a brilliant way of balancing things out. Earth has had billions of years of practice. The best gardening comes with observation, plus a bit of trial and error. Keeping this in mind, there are many native plants that can be introduced into ornamental gardens. Check out the links below; you might even discover that you already have some native plants in your garden. Look and see what you may already have intuitively planted!

Digital Resources for Virginia Native Plants:

"Native Plants for Southeast Virginia," www.deq.virginia.gov/Native-Plants-for-Southeast-Virginia-Guide.pdf

"Native Plants for Northern Virginia," <https://www.novaregion.org/DocumentCenter/View/10615>

Regional Plant Guides for Virginia," vnps.org/regional-plant-guides-for-virginia

SOURCES:

Gardening with Native Wild Flowers (Samuel B. Jones, Jr., and Leonard E. Foote, 1997)

Growing and Propagating Wild Flowers (Phillips, 1985)

The New England Wild Flower Society Guide to Growing and Propagating Wildflowers of the United States and Canada (Cullina, 2000)

Native Plants of the Northeast: A Guide for Gardening and Conservation (Leopold, 2005)

Southeastern Wildflowers (Midgley, 1999)

Wildflowers Around the Year (Ryden, 2001)

Wildflowers in Color: A Field Guide to More Than 250 Wildflowers of Eastern North America (Stupka, 1994)

Wildflowers of the Blue Ridge and Great Smoky Mountains (Adkins, 2005)

“Protecting Plants from Cold Temperatures,” Extension.MissState.edu/publications/p2303.

“Frost and Cold Injury - Annuals, Bulbs, Groundcovers, Perennials, and Vines,” Extension.Univ.Maryland.edu/frost-and-cold-injury

“*Asclepias tuberosa*,” Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center, www.wildflower.org/plantDataBase

Native Plant Finder, Va.Dept.of Conservation, www.dcr.virginia.gov/natural-heritage/native-plants-finder

May Tasks and Tips

By Melanie | May 2018 - Vol.4 No.5



Photo by Peggy Kaplan

Yikes! It's already May, and it snowed in April. How does the over-zealous gardener recover from a late start to the planting and growing season this year? I have a city cabin and a country home, not to mention the four large rural historic estates and five inner urban gardens I attend to, and for some reason, I decided to rent an allotment. Help! What have I gotten myself into this year? Will I be able to make it work? I'm always up for a challenge, but did my enthusiasm for keeping busy this summer while my daughter is at camp create an obstacle no "Super Gardener" can overcome? Well, have no fear, I have come up with a zen list of tasks and helpful links in order to bring back balance to the frantic first few weeks of May. Take a look:

1. Clean up! clean up! clean up! Pulling weeds, cutting back winter interest, and transplanting.
2. Mow! Before the grass gets too long and the weeds spread their seeds.
3. Start planting seeds and annuals! Waiting until Mother's Day is one safe way to avoid a late frost.
4. Keep on weeding!

For Detailed Tasks and Tips

Review the May Tasks and Tips from prior issues of "The Garden Shed" — and find out whether and how to prune lilacs and peonies, plus how to identify good bugs and bad bugs in your garden:

pmgarchives.com/the-ornamental-garden-in-may

Find out what your lawn needs in May:

- <http://pmgarchives.com/article/may-lawn-care-2/>
- nsvmgga.org/Va.Coop.Ext/may-lawns-landscaping.pdf

Review the Virginia Cooperative Extension's tasks and tips lists:

- May Tasks and Tips for **Perennials, Annuals and Bulbs**: nsvmgga.org/Va.Coop.Ext/may-perennials-annuals-bulbs.pdf
- May Tasks and Tips for **Trees, Shrubs and Groundcovers**: nsvmgga.org/Va.Coop.Ext./Trees_Shrubs_Grnd.pdf
- May Tasks and Tips for your **Houseplants**: nsvmgga.org/Va.Coop.Ext/may-interior-gardening.pdf

Happy Gardening!

Upcoming Events – Garden Gate Tours and Gardening Basics Classes

By Cathy Caldwell | May 2018 - Vol.4 No.5

Through The Garden Gate Tour: May 12

The Garden of Gayle & Luis Gutierrez

May 12 @ 9:00 am - 12:00 pm
[Gayle & Luis Gutierrez](#), 70 Graemont Lane
Earlsville, VA [+ Google Map](#)

Gayle and Luis moved to Earlsville in 1998 after 25 years in Texas. Comfortable with cars, heat and a killing sun, they fell in love with their forest and wildlife until... the challenge of gardening in these conditions began.

Admission is \$5 at the door

[Find out more »](#)

Garden Basics Class: *Gardening with Perennials*

Saturday, May 12 @ 2:00 pm - 4:00 pm
[Trinity Episcopal Church](#), 1118 Preston Avenue
Charlottesville, 22903 [+ Google Map](#)

Learn how to select the best perennials for sunny or shady conditions, how to phase bloom for season-long interest and how to properly care for perennials to keep them healthy and looking their best. COST: FREE.
HOW TO REGISTER: Send...

[Find out more »](#)

Through The Garden Gate Tour: Saturday, June 9

The Garden of Judy Riegel

Saturday, June 9 @ 9:00 am - 12:00 pm
[Judy Reigel's Garden](#), 380 Spring Lane
Ivy, VA [+ Google Map](#)

Judy and her family moved to Charlottesville in 1998 and felt fortunate to find their Ivy home located within what long-time Charlottesville residents remember as the Spring Hill Farm.

Admission is \$5 at the door

[Find out more »](#)

Garden Basics Class: *Growing Herbs: Thyme for Fun*

Saturday, June 9 @ 2:00 pm - 4:00 pm

Learn the basics for successful growing, harvesting and preserving a variety of useful and ornamental herbs.

COST: FREE

HOW TO REGISTER: Send your contact information (name, address, phone number, and email address) and name of class (Garden Basics-Growing Herbs: Thyme for Fun) to info@pmgarchives.com.

Asparagus Stems and Tips, Sliced and Diced, Yield Surprisingly Different Flavors

By Cate Whittington | May 2018 - Vol.4 No.5



To me, asparagus is a quintessential sign of spring. While available in the groceries year-round, there is nothing quite like fresh spears—green, purple, and white—harvested locally every spring. If you Google *asparagus*, one of the first things to pop up are the words *stinky pee*. In an article for *Eating Well Magazine*, Cheryl Forberg, R.D. addresses this rather taboo subject by saying, “. . . asparagus contains a unique compound that, when metabolized, gives off a distinctive smell in the urine. Young asparagus contains higher concentrations of the compound, so the odor is stronger after eating these vernal shoots. There are, however, no harmful effects, either from the sulfuric compounds or the odor! While it is believed that most people produce these odorous compounds after eating asparagus, few people have the ability to detect the smell.”

So, if you have been avoiding asparagus for the aforementioned reason, I think it is safe to say that you should not let its odorous qualities deter you from adding this lovely green stalk to your dinner plate! Focus instead on its many health benefits. This nutrient-rich vegetable is purportedly a natural diuretic, high in antioxidants, with brain-booster and cancer-fighting properties.

Asparagus may be roasted, steamed, sautéed, boiled, baked, or eaten raw—yes, RAW. It may be chopped and pureed, added to soups, salads, pasta, and quiche.

Asparagus bundles, tied with chives, make an elegant side dish for succulent lamb chops and buttered new potatoes.

Simple Recipes to Celebrate the Versatility of Asparagus, Harbinger of Spring

Raw Asparagus Salad (Four Servings)

Mark Bittman



For a crunchy, fresh-tasting treat, try one of Mark Bittman’s delectable salads. They’re as simple as slice and shave raw asparagus spears and toss with a light dressing. Italian-Style or Japanese-Style. Take your pick!

Ingredients

1½-2 pounds asparagus, any thickness

For Italian Style:

For Japanese Style:

Olive oil to taste	1 Tbsp. sesame seed
Lemon juice to taste	1 tsp. sesame oil
Salt and pepper to taste	2 tsp. rice vinegar
Freshly shaved Parmesan to taste	Salt and pepper to taste

Directions

Cut off the woody bottoms of the asparagus spears; discard. Cut off the flower ends and set aside. Using a vegetable peeler, remove the dark green outer skins of each spear. Set aside. Cut remaining stalks diagonally into 1/4 inch rounds. Place the asparagus stalks, ribbons, and stems in large bowl.

Italian-Style: Sprinkle the asparagus with lemon juice, salt and pepper, and top with parmesan.

Japanese-Style: Toast sesame seeds in a dry skillet over medium heat. Combine the toasted sesame seeds with sesame oil and rice vinegar. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Spoon dressing over asparagus and toss gently.

Asparagus Pesto

Mark Bittman



Whip up a pesto and serve it with chicken or fish, or toss it with pasta. The pasta pictured here is pappardelle, but twisted pasta varieties—such as fusilli, gemelli, or orecchiette—are best for absorbing the pesto.

Ingredients

1 pound asparagus, trimmed and cut into 2" segments

1 clove garlic

1/4 cup pine nuts

1/4 cup olive oil

3/4 cup grated Parmesan cheese

Freshly ground pepper/ salt

Juice of 1/2 lemon

Directions

Bring a large pot of water to a boil and add salt to the pot. Add asparagus and cook until tender, not mushy, about 8 minutes. Drain well, reserving some of the cooking liquid. Cool asparagus slightly before transferring to a food processor. Add the garlic, pine nuts, 2 tablespoons of the oil, Parmesan, pinch of salt, and a few tablespoons of cooking liquid. Process the mixture, gradually adding olive oil and more cooking liquid if necessary. Add lemon juice, salt and pepper to taste. Pulse.

Resources:

You can watch Mr. Bittman make these two asparagus salads: www.nytimes.com/video/asparagus-salad-two-ways

www.eatingwell.com/article/powerful-health-benefits-of-asparagus-you-probably-didnt-know/