

Growing Artichoke, Asparagus, Rhubarb and Onions

in Orange County

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Artichoke

Nearly all artichokes grown commercially in the United States are grown on the Central California coast. The climate there, mild winters and relatively cool summer is ideal for year round production. Artichokes along the coast can be productive for up to 10 years. In hot inland areas artichokes are usually grown as a winter (cool season) annual. The plants are quite striking and can be used along side other annual or perennial flowers. If not harvested the flowers are quite attractive in the garden or in a vase.

Artichoke plants can grow quite large, a healthy plant reaching 4 feet tall and 6 feet wide. Space plants accordingly. Provide full sun near coast. In hot inland areas provide afternoon shade. During the growing season make certain the soil stays moist. Artichokes prefer well-drained soils. Artichokes perform poorly located in areas with root competition from nearby trees or large bushes. Provide ample fertilizer. Snails, caterpillars and aphids are the primary pests.

Near the coast plants can produce all year. After harvest the plants are immediately cut down to the dirt. This encourages new stalks to grow immediately. In inland areas the plants produce in late spring-early summer and remain dormant in summer until the ground cools. One full grown plant can produce around 10 flowers at a time.

Asparagus

At one time fields of asparagus lined both the 5 and the 405 freeways in Irvine. Asparagus is a long-lived perennial that remains productive for at least 10 years. It is also attractive enough to use as a background screen during the summer and fall. Harvest season is early to mid spring locally for about 2 months. Asparagus plants go dormant in late fall. We harvest the early spring growth emerging from the soil. Commercial farms often recut the fields in summer and harvest spears as the field regrows.

Asparagus plants grow about 5 feet tall and 3-4 feet wide. Full sun is best, but the plants do decently in part shade. They adapt to most soils if drainage is decent. Generally asparagus plants are spaced 1 foot apart in rows that are 3 feet apart. They prefer average water. Fertilizer is typically applied in late March and early June. Snails are the primary pest.

The most common way to start asparagus is from crowns (aka bareroot). These are planted in holes 2-4 inches deep with the roots spread out. (Asparagus crowns are set much deeper in cold winter climates.) The young plants do not grow until the soil warms in spring. Plants should not be harvested until the second spring.

Harvest spears when they are 5-10 inches long. Break them off or use a small knife to cut at/or just below ground level. Use caution because there are new spears developing just along side. Each single plant can produce about 3 spears per week. As the harvest continues the plants become gradually weaker and the new spears will emerge with more slender stalks. Discontinue harvest when stalks are only pencil thick. Allow the plants to grow for the rest of the year and rebuild their strength for next year's harvest season. In mid-winter trim the dead stems to the ground.

Rhubarb

Rhubarb is a perennial in far inland and northern climates, but is often grown as a winter annual in Orange County. Rhubarb performs best in cold winter climates. In Canada rhubarb plants can reach 7-8 feet in height. In Orange County expect 3 feet. Rhubarb needs a good winter chill to promote vigorous spring growth. Rhubarb doesn't perform when temperatures exceed 90°F. The leaf stalks are the part of the plant that is harvested and consumed. Other parts of this plant are mildly poisonous.

Rhubarb should be planted in full sun along the coast, partial shade inland. The soil should be very well-drained and sandy. Do not amend the soil with compost. Compost mixed with the soil nearly always causes the roots to rot when the soil gets hot in the summer. Water regularly. Immediate remove any flower stalks as they form.

If grown as a winter annual then all the leaves are removed in spring.

If grown as a perennial, don't harvest the first year (or just remove a few the first year). Pull (don't cut) leaf stalks for up 4-5 weeks in spring, but never remove all leaves from a single plant.

Onions

Onions are a biennial grown as an annual. Onion plants form a bulb their first year (when harvested and eaten) and bloom (ruining the bulb) their second year.

Different types of onions are grown across the US depending upon the day length required to initiate bulb formation. In Orange County our best performers are the *short day* and *intermediate day* varieties. *Long day* varieties are grown in the North where summer days are much longer.

Onions can be planted as seeds, seedlings, or sets. We do not recommend sets (runty bulbs from the previous year's crop) because they often flower and rarely produce large bulbs that are mild and sweet. Large onion bulbs are 4-5 inches in diameter.

We recommend onion seedlings (young bare root onion plants grown from seed) planted on the first day of winter. If planted earlier, these seedlings often bloom.

Onions should be grown in full sun on very well-drained soil. They can be grown individually in containers as small as 6-inches across. The faster onions grow, the larger and sweeter the bulbs will be. Space the plants about 4 inches apart. It is important not to plant the seedlings too deep. Bury the root just deep enough to hold up the foliage. Apply ample fertilizer and keep the soil moist. The tubular leaves develop quickly. The bulbs begin developing in spring and mature late spring-early summer depending upon the variety.

Candy This is currently the best selling onion in the US. It is a globe-shaped, yellow onion that can reach 6 inches in diameter! The flesh is sweet and mild. It stores for about 3 months. This onion often wins a blue ribbon at the OC Fair. *Intermediate day variety*

Contessa This is a large, globe-shaped white onion that can reach 5 inches in diameter. It is mild and sweet. It stores for about 2 months. Contessa is the best, white early harvesting onion. *Short day variety*

Red Candy Apple This is the best red onion we can grow. The bulbs are round and somewhat flattened and a beautiful glossy purple red. Bulb diameter is 3+ inches. The mildly sweet flesh is white with purple rings. It stores for about 2 months. *Intermediate day variety*

Super Star This is a large white onion. The bulbs are globe shaped and can reach 4-inches in diameter. The flesh is sweet and mild. It stores for about 2 months. *Intermediate day variety*

Texas Super Sweet This is a very large, globe-shaped yellow onion that can reach 6 inches in diameter!

The flesh is sweet and mild. It stores for about 3 months. *Short day variety*

Yellow Granex (Vidalia) This is a large, round, somewhat flattened yellow onion that can reach 5 inches in diameter. It is famous for its mild sweet flavor. It stores for about 1 month. *Short day variety*