

roads where it grew. The biggest problem is finding it, among tall weeds, in the first day after emergence when it has to be cut. Dad always made it a point to notice tall stands of wild asparagus later in the summer whenever they waved in the breeze. He would stop his car, get out, and mark the location of the patch with orange flagging tape he carried for this purpose. If the highway department or winter weather didn't take down his flags, we'd have well-marked asparagus checkpoints all over the county the next spring. We kids loved the idea of eating anything stolen, especially with lots of butter.

In my adult life I have dug asparagus beds into the property of every house I've owned, and some I rented—even tiny urban lots and student ghettos—always leaving behind a vegetable legacy waving in the wake of my Johnny-Asparagus-seed life. I suppose in those unsettled years I was aspiring to a stability I couldn't yet purchase. A well-managed asparagus bed can keep producing for twenty or thirty years, but it's a ludicrous commitment to dig one into the yard of a student rental. It's hard work to dig the trench, fill it with compost, and tuck in a row of asparagus crowns ordered from a seed company. Then you wait *three years* for a harvest. A too-young plant gets discouraged when you whack off its every attempt to send up new shoots in the spring, abuse that will make the plant sink into vegetable despair and die.

After the plant has had two full summers to bulk up, then you can begin cutting off its early efforts—but only for two weeks in the first year of harvest. Even with fully mature plants, the harvester must eventually back off from this war between producer and consumer, and let the plant win. After about eight weeks of daily cutting, the asparagus farmer puts away the knife, finally letting the spears pass beyond edibility into the plants they long to be. For most crop species, the season ends when all the vegetable units have been picked and the mother plant dies or gets plowed under. Asparagus is different: its season ends by declaration, purely out of regard for the plant. The key to the next spring's action is the starch it has stored underground, which only happens if the plant has enough of a summer life to beef up its bank account. Of all our familiar vegetables, the season for local, fresh asparagus is the very shortest, for this reason: Don't expect baby asparagus tips any time other than March, April,

May, unless you live in New Zealand or South America. Some California farmers have worked out a way to cut a brief second harvest in late fall, but this is exceptional. For most of us, if we see asparagus in any month far removed from April, we're looking at some hard traveling. At our house we only cut asparagus for the weeks it's in season, but during those weeks we eat it *a lot*—the spears must be cut every day. About the same time the asparagus plant is getting weary of our management plan, we're starting to feel the same way. It works out.

From the outlaw harvests of my childhood, I've measured my years by asparagus. I sweated to dig it into countless yards I was destined to leave behind, for no better reason than that I believe in vegetables in general, and this one in particular. Gardeners are widely known and mocked for this sort of fanaticism. But other people fast or walk long pilgrimages to taste the spirit of what they believe makes our world whole and lovely. If any gardeners can, in the same spirit, put our heels to the shovel, kneel before a trench holding tender roots, and then wait three years for an edible incarnation of the spring equinox, who's to make the call between ridiculous and reverent?

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The asparagus plant's life history sets it apart, giving it a special edge in the garden's first major edible. It's known botanically as a perennial, with a lifespan of many years. The rest of our plant foods are almost always the annuals: beans, fruits, or seeds of plants that begin life in spring as seedlings and sprout just a few months later when they're frozen by autumn, or when the weather comes first. (The exceptions are the fruits we call berries, which grow on berry bushes or trees, and root crops, which operate a little differently, more about these later.) Annuals tend to grow more quickly than perennials and have been cultivated as food crops for thousands of years. The grass family (whose seed heads are our grains) is especially well suited to the clear winner in the carbon-fixing efficiency game: asparagus wins the vegetable prize for living longer than one year, and it is the very first one to leap up in springtime, offering a taste of the season when other vegetables are still at the seedling stage; it had