# PRODUCTION OF RHUBARB AND ASPARAGUS AS NURSERY CROPS

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In the last few years there has been a marked increase in the hobby of gardening throughout the United States. Seed companies, garden supply houses and canning jar producers, and we, as nurserymen, can attest to this increased activity. As nurserymen we are in line to cash in on this trend in many ways. Many of us produce or sell fruit trees and grapevines and other related items for this market. It may well be, however, that we are overlooking some items on which a good return can be made. Here at L.E. Cooke Co., we grow several items besides trees and vines that would be of interest to the home gardener, such as horseradish, artichokes, berry vines, Jerusalem artichokes, rhubarb and asparagus. When I tell you what is involved with two of these crops, rhubarb and asparagus, you may see a place for them in your operation.

**Planting.** In the past we have planted these two crops in the spring and in the fall; both dates have their advantages and disadvantages. Fall sowing of the seed allows one to get this job done during a slack season of the year for the bareroot grower, and at the same time cuts down on the spring rush somewhat. Also a well-done fall sowing provides much more growing time before harvest, which provides larger stock for market. On the other hand, a fall sown crop requires more attention during the winter season, a very busy time for us. In our area watering is critical during late December and January. Our soil also tends to compact severely during the winter rains; as a result, mulching fall seedbeds with sawdust is a must for economically uniform stands.

Spring sowing of seeds results in less cost of cultural practices due to the reduced time the crop is in the ground. Mulch is usually not necessary, which also reduces the cost. The primary disadvantage of spring sowing is the length of the growing season. If the spring is wet and planting is late, or if the spring is too cool and germination is slow, the season can be reduced critically. Rhubarb seems to develop enough size most of the time even during a short season, but asparagus needs the full allotment of time when it is spring-planted.

Our seed is planted by hand from shaker jars. The nearly 6 acres of rhubarb and asparagus we grow can be planted by three men in one day. Our asparagus is sown at approximately 33 lbs. per acre and rhubarb at approximately 12 lbs. per acre.

This seedling rate is based on 44-inch row spacing. The seed is sown ½ to 1 inch in the spring or 1 to 2 inches in the fall.

**Cultural Practices.** Cultural practices on these two crops are very nearly the same. Prior to planting, the soil is fumigated with methyl bromide. The soil is then prepared for ground application of super-phosphate and soil sulfur. The land is then bedded and the seed is sown. Once the seedlings are up, the most important thing one can do is to keep the water on them. Depending on the weather, approximately two inches per week is necessary. One can fail with asparagus at this point if the soil becomes too compacted or too dry for good root development. I saw the best top growth of asparagus the same year that the roots failed to develop sufficient length to sell. To solve this problem we make sure that the water soaks completely across the row each time and two to three times per year we rip every middle 18 to 20" deep. In September the water is taken off to harden the plants for early October digging. The tops are still green but they are sufficiently hard to be dug and stored successfully. We take advantage of the ground that we harvest these crops from to plant seedlings the next year, especially those species sensitive to methyl bromide fumigation. Regrowth of the asparagus or rhubarb is easily handled.

**Harvest.** The asparagus crop consists of two main cultivars on approximately three acres from which we harvest approximately 350,000 crowns. These are dug one row at a time and moved into the shade where the tops are removed. There they are graded, counted, tied, dusted with captan and packed in wire bound crates. They are held in the shade in an area where they can get good air movement until they are shipped. The rhubarb is grown on 2.75 acres from which we can harvest approximately 145,000 sections. These are dug and divided, if necessary, then packed and stored the same as asparagus.