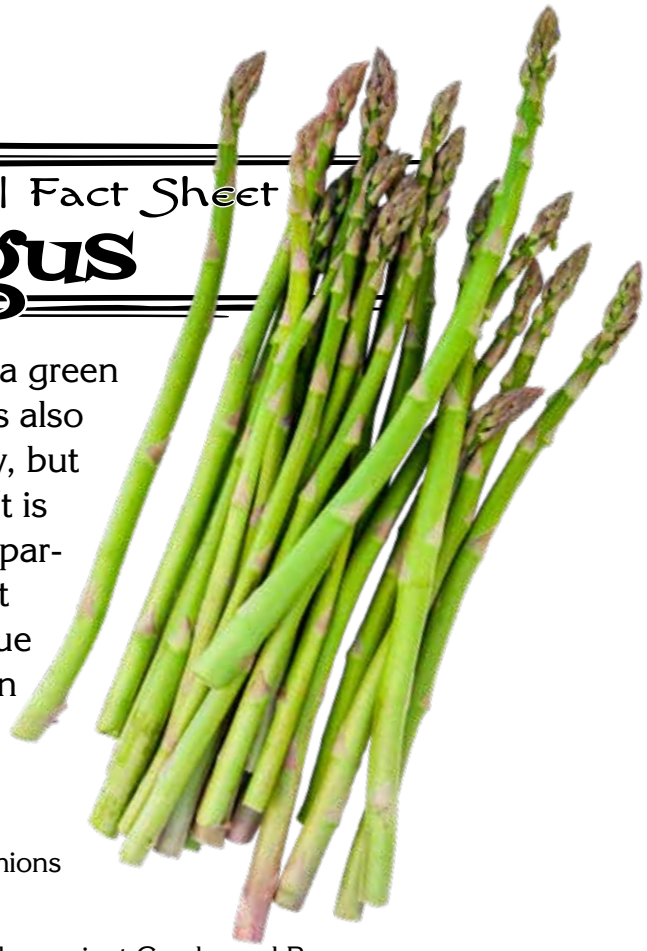
Harvest of the Month | Fact Sheet

# Asparagus



While most people think of asparagus as a green vegetable, white and purple asparagus is also available. White asparagus is not a variety, but is asparagus grown in the absence of sunlight. It is slightly sweeter and has less fiber than green asparagus. Purple asparagus is bred to be purple, but turns green when cooked. While Europeans value white asparagus, Americans tend to prefer green asparagus.

## Did you know?

- Asparagus is a member of the lily family, closely related to onions and leeks although different in appearance and flavor.
- Asparagus cultivation began more than 2,500 years ago by the ancient Greeks and Romans.
- Asparagus requires about three years from planting to produce spears, but lasts for about 15 to 20 years.
- Some people are able to detect a change in the smell of their urine after eating asparagus.

## Selection

Look for asparagus that has tender green stalks that are uniform in color with compact, firmly closed tips. Stalks vary in thickness, which is not an indication of quality. Contrary to popular belief, thin stems are not necessarily more tender than thicker stems. Avoid asparagus with wilted tips, wrinkled stalks, and stalks that have deep splits or cracks in the cut end.

## Storage

To maintain freshness, stand upright in 2 inches of cold water and cover with a plastic bag. Store in the refrigerator. For best quality, use within 2 or 3 days.

## Handling

Trim stem ends of fresh asparagus about ¼ inch. Wash in cold water several times and pat dry.

## Harvest Season

According to the PA Preferred Seasonality Calendar, asparagus is in season in Pennsylvania from April through June.

## School Meal Connection

Asparagus is considered an "other" vegetable in the school lunch and breakfast meal pattern.

## Nutrition

Asparagus is a good source of vitamin A, vitamin C, vitamin K, and folate. Vitamin A helps maintain good vision and fight infection. Vitamin C is important in the body's healing process and may play a role in guarding against heart disease and cancer. Vitamin C also helps the body absorb iron. Vitamin K is important in the blood clotting process and therefore helps us avoid bleeding too much from cuts and scrapes. Folate is needed to produce healthy red blood cells.

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## Finding Asparagus

Child Nutrition Program operators may be able to find local asparagus in a variety of ways. Check with your produce distributor to learn what they have available. You can search for products through the PA Preferred website or connect with local producers through produce auctions or farmer's markets. The Food Trust has also developed a Guide to Local Produce in Keystone Schools which identifies producers who are interested in selling to schools.

## Preparation

Asparagus can be eaten raw. It can also be added to dishes such as pasta, casseroles, soups, or omelets. Cooking methods include steaming, roasting, grilling, and sautéing.

## Recipe | Pasta with Chicken & Asparagus

50 servings (1 cup)

**Credits:** A one cup portion provides 2.25 oz eq meat/meat alternate, 1.25 oz eq grain, ¼ cup red/orange vegetable, and ⅛ cup additional vegetable.

| Ingredients | Weight | Measure | Directions |
|---|---|---|---|
| Dry penne pasta | 4 lb | | 1. Cook pasta according to package directions. Drain and set aside. |
| Local asparagus, washed, trimmed, cut | 5 lb | | 2. Meanwhile, in a large stock pot, steam kettle, or tilt skillet combine the asparagus, garlic powder, salt, and pepper. Bring to a low boil and reduce heat to a simmer. Cover and cook for 15 minutes. |
| Garlic powder | | 2 TBL | |
| Salt | | 1 TBL + 1 tsp | |
| Pepper | | 1 TBL + 1 tsp | |
| Canned diced tomatoes | 7 lb 8 oz | | 3. Add the drained pasta and canned chicken and diced tomatoes and stir to combine. Transfer into full-size 2 ½-inch steam table pans and evenly distribute the parmesan cheese over the top. Critical Control Point: Heat to 165°F or higher for at least 15 seconds. |
| Canned shredded chicken or frozen diced chicken | 7 lb 8 oz | | |
| Parmesan cheese | 13.6 oz | | |
| | | | 4. Serve 1 cup portions using an 8 ounce ladle or spoodle. |
| | | | 5. **Critical Control Point: Hold for hot service at 135°F or higher.** |

**Source:** Nebraska Farm to School Harvest of the Month Recipe Guide

**Check out the PA Harvest of the Month website (www.paharvestofthemonth.org) for sources, additional resources, and recipes.**

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