
Asparagus



Market requirements

Varieties: Most popular - green

Less popular - white or purple

Preferred varieties are Sito, Limbras, UC157, UC72, UC66, Jersey Giant or hybrids derived from these. It is of the utmost importance to select varieties meeting market requirements and the soil type on which they are to be grown.

Standards: The EEC has minimum quality standards for asparagus. Shoots must be:

- whole
- fresh in appearance
- sound
- free from damage by rodents or insects
- practically unbruised
- clean, i.e. practically free from earth or any other dirt
- free from any undue external moisture
- free from foreign smell or taste.

The cut at the base of the shoots must be as clean and as square as possible. Shoots must not be hollow, split, peeled or broken.

Three classes are defined with specifications over and above the minimum standards: Extra, Class I and Class II.

Commercial specifications use these as a basis for further defining the buyers' own requirements. Multiples are unlikely to buy below Class I.

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Size: By length- long asparagus: 17-22cm
- short asparagus:12-17cm
- Class II, bulk:12-22cm
- asparagus tips: under 12cm

Green asparagus can be 27 cm, provided at least one third of the length is green. Buyers for the retail market prefer 90% to be green, however.

By diameter: measured at mid-point of length
Extra Class: minimum 12 mm, average 12-16 mm,
larger preferred, maximum variation in
package 8 mm

Class I: minimum 10 mm, average 10-16 mm,
maximum variation 10 mm

Class II: minimum 10 mm

A size tolerance of 10% is allowed to a maximum deviation of 1 cm in length and 2 mm in diameter

The catering trade demands the largest size of asparagus in terms of length and diameter, whereas retailers buy different categories, as Extra Class Long, Shorter Extra or Class I for chopping and mini asparagus.

Multiples tend to prefer Extra Class diameters.

Shape: Well formed with upright stems
Extra Class: straight
Class I: slightly curved
Class II: may be more curved and have less compact tips

Retailers prefer shoots not to be tapering from a wide base.

Colour: Green is preferred with minimum white base on shoot

Ripeness: Tips compact (seeds tight)

**Taste &
Texture:** Firm, not stringy; “woodiness” must be minimal

Getting to market

Harvesting, Handling and Storage

Asparagus is very perishable and needs careful handling. It must be handpicked and cut with a sharp knife horizontally at its base, either at ground level or slightly below. Cutting should be on a daily basis, although some hybrid varieties allow less frequent cutting. The spears can be washed to remove soil and dirt, but this must be in clean, potable water and they must be dried completely before packing. Pre-cooling is essential and the ideal temperature for transport and storage is 2°C.

Asparagus can be kept fresh for a period of 2-3 weeks around this temperature. Below this, chilling damage is likely to occur and will certainly occur at temperatures below freezing, while above 4°C freshness will not be maintained. In addition, the relative humidity should be kept at a minimum of 95%. Asparagus must not be stored with produce which gives off ethylene (such as passion fruit).

Packaging

Asparagus can be flat packed or upright, which maintains stem straightness and is more popular for importers planning to sell to caterers or to consumer pack on receipt. If flat packed, it should be shipped in corrugated fibreboard boxes or wooden trays, with ventilation, in quantities of 5/6 kg. Flat packed asparagus is normally already consumer packed, in bundles, in plastic, or in overwrapped trays. Upright asparagus is normally sent in bulk in quantities of 5/6 kg in wooden, waxed fibreboard or corrugated fibreboard boxes (the latter must have lining to strengthen the box) of a trapezoidal shape (in the form of the lower half of a pyramid) length 28 cm at the bottom, 23 cm at the top, width 23 cm and height 27 cm. A wet paper layer may be stacked at the bottom of the box in order to keep the stems moist.

EEC standards require that there be uniformity of quality, size and colour in each bundle or package. If bundled, it should be firmly bound in amounts of 500 grams, 1 or 2 kg and be of uniform length. The bundles in one box should be of the same weight and length. Each package must display:

- the identification of the packer or dispatcher
 - the nature of the produce
 - the origin of produce (at least the country)
 - produce indication, if produce not visible, ie:
 - Asparagus - Green
 - Asparagus - White
 - Asparagus - Violet } followed by short or tips, as appropriate
 - commercial specifications, ie class, net weight and size
- (continued)**

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Handling information can also be displayed, giving temperature range, fragile and side-up symbols.

Multiples normally sell asparagus in plastic tray punnets or overwrapped with microperforated PVC film.

Branding and Promotion

Asparagus is grown in the UK and the Asparagus Growers' Association promotes British asparagus. The USA, as a major supplier to the UK market, also funds promotion, sometimes on an in-store basis. Multiples are willing to carry out in-store promotions, in co-operation with a supplier, even at short notice, if a grower knows that he has good quality and sufficient quantities available for the market in a particular week. As a basic form of promotion it is advisable to use good quality packaging, with name and origin clearly displayed. It is mandatory to display:

- country of origin
- produce indication (if not visible in packaging)
- class

and it is also advisable to include (mandatory for EEC and Mediterranean countries) the following information on the pack:

- net weight
- size
- date of packing
- name of packer and/or dispatcher
- name of grower

Import regulations

Asparagus comes under tariff heading 0709 20.00 and tariffs are those in force for the EEC:

	1 Mar- 14 Aug	1 Feb- 28 Feb	1 Oct- 31 Jan	1 Oct- 31 Oct	15 Aug- 30 Sept	1 Nov- 28 Feb
Full tariff:	16%	16%	16%	16%	16%	16%
GSP countries:	16%	16%	12%		16%	
Morocco:	16%			16%	16%	8.7%
Cyprus:	16%			16%	16%	11.6%
Turkey:	Free	Free	Free	Free	Free	Free
ACP countries:	16%	16%	9.6%		9.6%	
Least developed developing countries (LDDC):	16%	16%	16%	16%	16%	16%

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In order to receive preferential tariff treatment, produce must be accompanied by the appropriate forms: EUR 1 for ACP countries or Form A for GSP countries. No other import regulations apply. Certain hygiene standards must be met and all fresh produce entering the EEC must be accompanied by the original of a phytosanitary certificate (see Appendix 1).

When to sell

Timing

Domestic production is available on the market from April to June and the UK supplies about 30% of estimated total asparagus sales. The USA is the next major supplier (also around 30%), from January to July, followed by Spain (10%) from March to mid-June. Chile is emerging as a strong supplier during September to early December and has overtaken Mexico as the fourth largest supplier in the market. Mexico is able to supply year-round, but imports slacken during the peak UK production. Other non-EEC suppliers of less significance are Australia, Argentina, Canada, Cyprus, Ethiopia, Ecuador, Israel, Malaysia, New Zealand, Peru, South Africa, Thailand, Uruguay, Zambia and Zimbabwe. There are two gaps in the market, which the newer entrants are trying to fill, in December/January and from July to the end of August.

The average wholesale price for asparagus during 1989/90 was 448 pence per kg, with a high of over 700 pence in December/January and a low of 230 pence in June. Prices do tend to be low in May/June when UK production is on the market, and are highest when the two seasonal gaps appear. An indication is provided of margins and costs in Appendix 4.

Market Trends

The UK market for asparagus has grown by over 300% in volume terms over the last decade and shows every sign of continuing to grow. It is a high value crop, with an estimated annual retail sales value of over £10 million. Likely to remain a stable favourite with the catering trade, it is the retail market that is forecast to show strongest growth. Some multiples are also keen to sell the extra fine "mini" asparagus shoots, so this may prove to be a growth market. The USA is trying to expand its share of imports, and is allocating resources to promote this, so other suppliers may see better results in trying to meet the gaps in December and August, outside the US supplying season.