

Ontario asparagus ready soon

April showers bring May flowers, like crocuses, daffodils and believe it or not, asparagus — the delectable member of the lily family!

When buying asparagus, look for straight, bright green stalks with tightly closed, purplish tips. Asparagus is generally sold in 500 gram (one pound) bunches, which provide four large servings.

Ontario asparagus is generally in the stores within a day of harvest and is best eaten the same day as purchased. However, the fresh flavor of Ontario asparagus can be maintained for up to two days, if the stalk ends

are wrapped in a dampened paper towel and the spears stored in a plastic bag in the refrigerator crisper.

When preparing for cooking, easily snap off the butt ends of the stalks where the white turns to green. Wash thoroughly in cold water and remove any traces of sand from under the scales. Take special care in handling the tip ends as they break easily.

There are many methods of cooking asparagus, but the secret to a superbly cooked product is timing. Whether steamed, boiled or stir-fried, asparagus should be cooked until tender-crisp, or about five to seven

minutes.

Asparagus is also delicious served cold. After cooking, immediately refresh under cold water to set the color and stop the cooking. Drain and chill.

You can make the asparagus season last longer by freezing. Simply prepare as for cooking, then group spears according to thickness of stalks. Blanch small spears two minutes, medium for three and large for four. Cool, drain, and pat dry and seal spears in freezer bags. Store up to one year at normal freezer temperatures.

Low in calories, plus vitamin C

Ontario asparagus is a special treat you can enjoy more often. Following are a few facts to explain why:

*Ontario asparagus is available from late April to late June; supplies peak from late May to mid-June.

*Ontario accounts for 60 per cent of the total Canadian asparagus production.

*About 50 per cent of Ontario's asparagus acreage is in Norfolk County. The balance of the crop is grown in Kent, Essex, and Simcoe Counties.

*Including the planting year, it takes three growing seasons before some asparagus can be harvested — and five or six seasons to obtain a full yield.

*The superb quality of Ontario asparagus is largely a result of the fact that most of the product reaches the market within a day of harvest. Also, a large percentage of the crop is transported in containers with water retaining pads. This container helps to keep the asparagus fresh by providing moisture to the stem bottoms.

*True Ontario asparagus lovers appreciate asparagus for its food value as well as for its delicate flavor. Four medium spears are an excellent source of vitamin C and provide only 10 calories.



Springtime asparagus with cheese sauce (Photo by Foodland Ontario).