

Enjoy
tender
'grass'

Fresh Ontario asparagus can be enjoyed at its tender best only by wise shopping and proper handling, according to food specialists at the Ontario Food Council, ministry of agriculture and food.

The palate isn't required to determine the quality of the asparagus stalks. When shopping take a close look at the tips.

A tightly closed and compact tip, bright green or purplish green in color, indicates a young, tender stalk. Tips that are open and spreading, sometimes referred to as "feathering", have passed their prime.

Thin angular stalks, usually under 1/2 inch in thickness are more likely to be stringy and tough. Choose instead, medium to thick stalks with short butt ends.

Fresh asparagus doesn't stay fresh long, so plan to use it promptly. Before cooking, remove loose scales from the stalks, then wash the stalks with warm water.

It's a shame to serve asparagus with the least little bit of tough stalk at the end. There is an easy way to tell where to make the break: hold the stalk loosely and snap off the end instead of cutting it off.

It should snap easily just where the tender part ends and the tough portion begins. If it doesn't snap but bends instead, the stalks are not fresh.

To maintain the tenderness of the spears, care must be taken in cooking them. Use a skillet or saucepan large enough to fit the whole spears. Lay the asparagus flat in salted boiling water. Boil gently, uncovered, until just tender.

Suggested cooking times are: small stalks — 6 minutes; medium stalks — 7 minutes; large stalks — 8 minutes. Drain and serve promptly for the utmost in tenderness.

Going
going
gone

For those of us who love asparagus, the months of May and June pass by all too quickly.

Weather co-operating, fresh Ontario asparagus usually appears around the second week of May and disappears around the middle of June, according to food specialists at the Ontario Food Council, ministry of agriculture and food.

Eat your fill while it's here and freeze some for more good eating during the winter months.

For freezing, select young, tender stalks with compact tips. Wash the asparagus spears thoroughly in cold water.

If there is sand under the leaflets, soak and wash in warm water or remove the leaflets. Break or cut off the butt ends.

Sort the spears into equal sizes — small (up to 1/4-inch diameter), medium (1/4to-1/2-inch), and large (over 1/2 inch). Blanch by dunking the spears in boiling water.

After the water returns to a boil, which should not take more than one minute, begin timing.

Blanch small stalks for 2 minutes, medium for 3 minutes and large for 4 minutes. Quickly remove the spears from the boiling water and immerse in ice cold water.

Cool quickly, dry and package in freezer bags or containers.

The butt ends which were broken or cut the stalks can also be blanched and frozen to be used for soup.

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