



The price is white

New season asparagus is already a hot seller at farmers' markets, but **Lynda Hallinan** reckons posh albino asparagus should be even more profitable.

I'm keeping my latest plans for my farmers' market stand firmly under wraps: black polythene wraps, to be precise. Having successfully grown a crop of sweet purple asparagus spears last spring, I'm now branching into blanching.

Blanching – depriving plants of sunlight to starve the chlorophyll from their tender stems – is a peculiarly European tradition. They'll blanch anything: sea kale, witloof chicory, celery, cardoons (a relative of globe artichokes), and even ruddy red rhubarb.

Yet, although white asparagus is popular in the award-winning restaurants featured in Cuisine magazine, I've never

seen it for sale in a supermarket or at a farmers' market here. Compare that to Europe, where ashen asparagus is commonplace at food markets in Germany, France, the Netherlands and Italy.

"It's so common in Europe that we had a German agricultural student here this year who had never seen green asparagus before," chuckles Canterbury asparagus authority Dr. Peter Falloon.

Peter is the South Island representative on the New Zealand Asparagus Council – he also chairs its research committee – and his Lincoln company, Aspara Pacific Ltd, is the southern hemisphere's only commercial asparagus breeder. (Asparagus isn't his sole interest; when I talked to him he had 72 new varieties of tissue-cultured potatoes on the go too.)

Peter has been breeding, growing, harvesting and exporting asparagus almost as long as I've been alive. It's a family affair: his wife Linda also sells fresh asparagus at the Canterbury Farmers' Market at Riccarton House.

If anyone knows how to make a buck from this spring speciality, it's Peter. His variety 'Pacific 2000' (you'll see it branded in supermarkets as 'Pacific Crown') was the highest-yielding green variety in nationwide trials. Not only did it outperform its nearest rival by 60 per cent, it also topped blind taste tests for Marks & Spencer in the UK, with their chef declaring it the sweetest asparagus he'd ever tasted.

Asparagus, like baby potatoes and fresh peas in the pod, should be eaten within a few hours of harvest for the best flavour and tenderness. As time goes by, the amputated spears slowly cannibalise their own sugar content, turning limp and bland.

Freshly picked purple asparagus – and it's Peter's 'Pacific Purple' variety that's best for blanching – is even sweeter than the standard green types. It's delicious raw in salads. That's because the levels of lignin – the fibrous tissue that turns asparagus woody – are naturally lower in purple asparagus. (The longer a spear is left to grow, the more lignin it develops. Try snapping an old spear; the spot where it breaks is the boundary between tough and tender.)

In Europe, blanched asparagus is traditionally grown in metre-high mounds of sandy soil. When the spears crack the surface, pickers carefully burrow down by hand to cut the base of the spear, then build the mound back up

to prevent light getting to the spears still to come.

"It's far too labour intensive to be profitable. It takes a minute to pick each spear," says Peter.

Figuring there had to be a better way, a few years ago the South Island Asparagus Growers' Association sought funding to investigate the feasibility of white asparagus production. They purchased a 50m x 5m portable FlexiTunnel, lined it with black polythene and rigged it up over an established asparagus bed.

A single sheet of black plastic isn't sufficient. Peter recommends an outer layer of 150 micron black/white plastic (like a traditional silage or baleage cover) with an inner layer of heavy duty 200 micron black polythene.

"You need at least 300 microns to block out every bit of light, as even the slightest crack results in off-colour asparagus. It develops a pinky tinge."

Harvesting in the dark is like playing blind man's bluff. It helps to own an LED headlamp. In the dark, asparagus spears grow rapidly yet still keep their tips tight. If left

unpicked for any longer than 48 hours, they turn from timid periscopes, just peeking out of the soil, into thigh-high tentacles. And whereas outdoor-grown asparagus is traditionally cut at 23-25cm then trimmed to 10-15cm, blanching allows for supple asparagus spears as long as your arm.

The beauty of a portable tunnelhouse, adds Peter, is if there's a strong demand for blanched produce, you can cover more rows. But if the market is flat, simply peel the covers off and let the colour come back into the cheeks of your crop.

In Cust, Mark and Diana Phibbs of Tasty Tips have two hectares of asparagus. They mainly export their crop of 'Pacific

Purple' and heritage green asparagus but save some to sell at the Oxford Farmers' Market. Mark also grows white asparagus under cover for the restaurant trade.

In September this year his portable tunnelhouse was ripped apart by the high winds that lashed Canterbury the day after the big quake, but it was back in action by October. Mark waits until after the first flush of purple spears has been harvested before he covers his designated rows.

"You don't get white asparagus straight away. The first lot of spears will still have a hint of pink even in a total blackout situation."

You can't keep asparagus in the dark for too long. By late November, Mark starts taking samples to test carbohydrate levels, "to see how much fuel is left in the tank", before the covers come off so the spears can go to fern to nourish the crowns for the following season.

Even though white asparagus commands premium prices – chefs are prepared to pay up to \$30/kg – it's still not cost-effective on a commercial scale, once you factor in

the cost of the tunnelhouse. Not wanting to burst my bubble, Mark suggests that I could successfully blanch small quantities under 44 gallon drums or upturned 20 litre plastic buckets.

He also reckons I'll need to sharpen up my powers of retail persuasion to sidestep the notoriously conservative Kiwi palate.

"It's taken five years for purple asparagus to become popular," he says. "You also need to know that most customers won't buy a more than 200g of asparagus at a time – that's an average-sized bunch."

Patience isn't one of my virtues, but given how much cheaper it is to raise asparagus from seed (\$5-7 per packet)

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cash crops

WITH LYNDA HALLINAN



ABOUT LYNDA

In 2006, *NZ Gardener* editor Lynda Hallinan made an ambitious New Year's resolution: to grow all her own fruit and veges in her Auckland garden. She turned her back on the supermarket and now supplements her homegrown produce by selling her excess crops at her local farmers' market. Having lived in the city for 15 years, Lynda's met a bloke with a lifestyle block, and the plans have gone large-scale.

than plant dormant crowns (\$2 per plant), I'm prepared to wait an extra year for my first crop.

Seeds sown in spring must be cosseted in trays or seed beds for twelve months before the crowns are ready to transplant into deep trenches filled with the finest mix of soil and muck money can buy. I've already started stockpiling alpaca manure from a lifestyle block up the road.

I'm starting my asparagus empire with 'Pacific Purple' and the French heirloom 'Argenteuil' (available from www.italianseedspronto.co.nz). 'Argenteuil' dates back to the 18th century, where it was discovered in a convent garden. It's an early variety that produces 2cm thick silver green/purple spears about three weeks earlier than most other varieties.

I've also put in two packets of 'Fat Bastard', a male hybrid I sourced from The Digger's Club in Australia. I bought it just for its name, though it's said to have the fattest spears of any variety. Here's hoping fat spears equal fat profits. ■

* **To order seed** of 'Pacific Purple' or the high-performing 'Pacific 2000', contact Dr Peter Falloon at Aspara Pacific Ltd by email: falloonz@xtra.co.nz