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# Welcome to the Asparagus Festival

From farm fields to festival fun, the National Asparagus Festival celebrates one of Oceana County's signature crops and the people who grow it. Each year, the festival brings together residents and visitors for a weekend filled with parades, concerts, contests, family activities, food and community traditions centered around Michigan asparagus.

Known as one of the nation's top asparagus-producing regions, Oceana County has deep agricultural roots, and the festival highlights the importance of the asparagus industry to the local economy and culture. Growers, volunteers, local businesses and community organizations all play a role in making the annual event a longtime tradition in Hart and the surrounding communities.

New this year is the popular asparagus eating contest, which invites competitors to test their speed and appetite during the

festival's Friday night kickoff celebration. Organizers expect the event to add another crowd-pleasing attraction to the weekend lineup while highlighting the festival's signature vegetable in a fun and competitive way.

This year's festival lineup also includes live entertainment, parades, carnival activities, vendor markets, children's events and appearances by the National Asparagus Festival Queen candidates. Festivalgoers also will find plenty of opportunities to enjoy asparagus-inspired foods and celebrate the start of summer along the lake-shore.

Whether you are a first-time visitor or a longtime attendee, the National Asparagus Festival offers a mix of hometown tradition, agricultural pride and family-friendly entertainment that continues to make it one of West Michigan's signature summer events.



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# Who Will Be Queen?

## National Asparagus Festival queen candidates announced

Five women will compete for the title of 2026 National Asparagus Festival Queen during this year's festival in Hart.

The 2026 queen candidates are:

- Makynzie Curtis, sponsored by A Bride's Time of Ludington
- Sami Weesies, sponsored by Up North Garden Center
- Shannon Beishuizen, sponsored by American Asparagus of New Era
- Katelyn Brown, sponsored by Springstead Law
- Jennifer Ramirez Coppedge, sponsored by Northwest Michigan Health Services

The queen and runner-up are scheduled to be crowned during the Friday evening concert June 12.

The National Asparagus Festival de-

scribes the queen as an ambassador for Oceana County's asparagus industry and local agriculture. According to the festival's official "Asparagus Royalty" information, the queen travels throughout Michigan promoting the asparagus industry of Oceana County and encouraging support for local agriculture.

Festival materials note the National Asparagus Festival crowns the only asparagus queen in the country. The queen represents the festival during parades, festivals and community appearances throughout the year while helping promote Oceana County's agricultural heritage.

The National Asparagus Festival traces its roots back to 1974, making 2026 the festival's 53rd year.



PHOTO BY QUEEN COORDINATOR, KENDRA LARIOS-MENDEZ

# Welcome!

TO THE  
**2026 National  
Asparagus Festival**



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# 53rd National Asparagus Festival Schedule

## June 12-14, 2026 | Hart and Oceana County, Michigan

The National Asparagus Festival celebrates Oceana County's asparagus industry with a weekend of entertainment, food, family activities, agricultural tours and community events throughout Hart and surrounding Oceana County communities. The festival dates back to 1973 and is held annually during Michigan's asparagus harvest season.



### Friday, June 12

#### KICKOFF PARTY

Time: 6-10 p.m. Location: Oceana County Fairgrounds Grandstands, Hart. Festival kickoff featuring live entertainment, food and evening activities. Gates open at 6 p.m.

#### ASPARAGUS EATING COMPETITION

Time: 6:30 p.m. Location: Oceana County Fairgrounds Grandstands, Hart. Competitive asparagus eating contest held during the Friday night kickoff festivities.

#### "YOUR GENERATION IN CONCERT"

Time: 7:30 p.m. Location: Oceana County Fairgrounds Grandstands, Hart. Live concert performance as part of opening night entertainment.

#### QUEEN CROWNING ON STAGE

Time: 8:30 p.m. Location: Oceana County Fairgrounds Grandstands, Hart. The 2026 National Asparagus Festival Queen will be crowned during the evening program.

### Saturday, June 13

#### RYAN WALSWORTH SPEAR-IT 5K REGISTRATION

Time: 7:30 a.m. Location: Silver Lake area. Participant registration for the annual festival 5K race.

#### RYAN WALSWORTH SPEAR-IT 5K

Time: 9 a.m. Location: Silver Lake area. Festival road race event connected to the National Asparagus Festival weekend.

#### QUILT SHOW

Time: 9 a.m.-1 p.m. Location: Hart area festival venues. Quilt displays and exhibits presented during the festival.

#### HART HERITAGE CAR SHOW

Time: 9 a.m.-1 p.m. Location: Hart Historic District. Classic and specialty vehicles on display in downtown Hart.

#### ARTS AND CRAFTS SHOW

Time: 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Location: Oceana County Courthouse lawn, downtown Hart. Vendor event featuring handmade crafts, artwork and specialty merchandise.

#### FARM TOUR

Time: 9:30 a.m. Location: Departs from Hart festival area. Tour highlighting Oceana County asparagus production and local agricultural operations.

#### TASTE OF ASPARAGUS

Time: 11 a.m.-1 p.m. Location: Hart Historic District/Heritage Hall area. Cooking competition and tasting event featuring asparagus-themed dishes.

#### KID'S ZONE

Time: 11 a.m.-3:30 p.m. Location: Downtown Hart. Family activities and children's entertainment throughout the afternoon.

#### JOAN GLOVER ROYALE PARADE

Time: 2 p.m. Location: Downtown Hart parade route. Festival parade featuring floats, community organizations, marching units and festival participants.

### Sunday, June 14

#### FLY-IN PANCAKE BREAKFAST

Time: 7:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m. Location: Oceana County Airport, Shelby. Traditional closing event featuring breakfast and visiting aircraft displays.

More information and updates are available at: National Asparagus Festival official website



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# Fresh Picks: Seasonal Recipes



From creamy comfort food to fresh spring salads, asparagus can do far more than serve as a simple side dish. During Michigan asparagus season, the versatile vegetable shines in everything from roasted sheet-pan dinners to chilled pasta salads and even guacamole. Whether picked up at a local farm market or harvested from Oceana County fields, fresh asparagus brings bright flavor, color and nutrition to the table. This collection highlights a variety of ways to enjoy one of Michigan's signature spring crops.

## ASPARAGUS GUACAMOLE

*Yield: 64 servings*

### INGREDIENTS

- 2½ pounds fresh Michigan asparagus
- Salt and pepper
- ½ cup lime juice
- 1 cup mild salsa
- Vegetable or olive oil, enough to lightly coat asparagus
- 1 cup lightly packed fresh cilantro
- 1 cup roughly chopped green onions
- 12 to 16 ounces softened cream cheese

### DIRECTIONS

- Wash asparagus and trim into 2-inch pieces.
- Toss asparagus with oil, salt and pepper.
- Roast in a 350-degree oven for 6 to 8 minutes, or until tender.
- Wash cilantro and remove stems.
- Wash and roughly chop green onions.
- Place all ingredients in a food processor and blend until smooth.
- Cover and refrigerate until serving.

## ASPARAGUS PASTA SALAD

*Yield: 50 half-cup servings*

### INGREDIENTS

- 18½ cups Michigan asparagus, cut into 2- to 3-inch pieces
- 12½ cups small shell pasta
- 9½ cups Italian dressing
- 6½ cups carrots, sliced into thin circles
- 6½ cups diced onions
- 3¼ cups diced sweet red peppers
- 4 tablespoons dried oregano

### DIRECTIONS

- Cook pasta according to package directions.
- Rinse, drain and allow pasta to cool.
- In a large bowl, combine pasta with the remaining ingredients and mix thoroughly.
- Marinate for about eight hours before serving.



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# Featuring Michigan Asparagus

## ASPARAGUS MAC AND CHEESE

*Yield: Serves 6-8*

### INGREDIENTS

- 1 pound elbow macaroni or shells
- 1 pound fresh asparagus, trimmed and cut into 1-inch pieces
- 4 tablespoons butter
- ¼ cup flour
- 3 cups milk
- 2 cups shredded sharp cheddar cheese
- 1 cup shredded mozzarella cheese
- ½ cup grated Parmesan cheese
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- Optional: breadcrumbs or crumbled bacon for topping

### DIRECTIONS

- Cook pasta according to package directions until al dente. Drain and set aside.
- Bring a pot of water to a boil and blanch asparagus pieces for 2 to 3 minutes until bright green and slightly tender. Drain.
- In a large saucepan, melt butter over medium heat. Whisk in flour and cook for about 1 minute.
- Slowly add milk, whisking constantly until the sauce thickens.
- Stir in cheddar, mozzarella and Parmesan cheeses until melted and smooth.
- Add garlic powder, salt and pepper.
- Fold in cooked pasta and asparagus.
- Transfer to a greased baking dish if desired. Top with breadcrumbs or bacon.
- Bake at 375 degrees for 15 to 20 minutes, or until bubbly and lightly golden.

## FARM MARKET ASPARAGUS SHEET-PAN DINNER

*Yield: Serves 4-6*

### INGREDIENTS

- 1 pound fresh Michigan asparagus, trimmed
- 1 pound baby potatoes, halved
- 1 pint cherry tomatoes
- 1 red onion, cut into wedges
- 4 boneless chicken thighs or sausage links
- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 teaspoon Italian seasoning
- 1 teaspoon smoked paprika
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- Lemon wedges, for serving
- Optional: fresh parsley or grated Parmesan

### DIRECTIONS

- Preheat oven to 425 degrees.
- Place potatoes and onion on a large sheet pan. Toss with olive oil, garlic, Italian seasoning, smoked paprika, salt and pepper.
- Roast for 15 minutes.
- Remove pan from oven and add chicken or sausage, asparagus and cherry tomatoes. Toss lightly to coat.
- Return to oven and roast another 20 to 25 minutes, or until potatoes are tender and meat is cooked through.
- Squeeze fresh lemon juice over the pan before serving. Garnish with parsley or Parmesan if desired.



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# From Hand-Cut to High-Tech: How Technology Changed Oceana County's Asparagus Industry

BY LOIS TOMASZEWSKI

For generations, spring in Oceana County has meant asparagus season.

From the fields surrounding Hart, Shelby, Mears and New Era, crews head into the rows each spring to harvest one of Michigan's signature crops. While the sight of hand-snapped asparagus remains familiar, much of the industry surrounding the har-

vest has changed dramatically over the decades. Hydrocooling — rapidly chilling asparagus after harvest using cold water systems — has become one of the biggest technological changes in the industry. The process helps preserve freshness and extend shelf life before asparagus is packed and shipped across the country.

Technology has also transformed the growing process itself.

production costs.

The harvest itself still depends heavily on workers moving through the fields each day during the short spring season. Michigan growers commonly use a traditional “snap” harvesting method in which asparagus is hand-snapped rather than cut below the soil surface. During warm weather, asparagus can grow so quickly that some fields may require harvesting more than once per day.

As labor costs continue rising, researchers and growers are increasingly exploring automation and mechanized harvesting technology. MSU agricultural engineer Yuzhen Lu is currently leading research into a vision-guided selective harvesting system designed specifically for Michigan asparagus production.

Michigan asparagus growers also continue investing in newer varieties and improved production systems. Modern asparagus fields can remain productive for more than a decade.

Oceana County also remains a center for asparagus education and innovation. MSU Extension continues hosting Oceana Asparagus Day each year in New Era, bringing together growers, researchers and industry leaders to discuss production trends and emerging technology.

While modern asparagus farming now includes sophisticated irrigation systems, cooling infrastructure and emerging automation research, growers say the heart of the industry remains much the same.

Each spring, crews still head into Oceana County's asparagus fields before sunrise, harvesting one spear at a time — continuing an agricultural tradition that has helped define the region for generations and inspired celebrations such as the National Asparagus Festival in Hart.



vest has changed dramatically over the decades.

Today's asparagus industry relies on hydrocoolers, precision irrigation, refrigerated transportation and research-driven field practices that growers say are helping Oceana County farms remain competitive in a changing agricultural economy.

“Oceana County has great infrastructure for handling asparagus post-harvest,” grower Steve Riley said in a 2025 industry interview. “We have multiple growers and receiving stations that have hydrocoolers and cold storage to quickly cool down harvested asparagus.”

Michigan State University researchers have conducted irrigation and production studies in Oceana County, examining how sprinkler systems, buried drip irrigation and other methods impact asparagus quality, yield and disease management. Those improvements have become increasingly important in Oceana County's sandy soils, which drain quickly during warm spring and summer conditions.

Despite advances in technology, asparagus remains one of Michigan's most labor-intensive crops. According to Michigan State University research, labor costs can account for roughly 55% of total asparagus

## Five Technologies That Changed Asparagus Farming

- Hydrocoolers — Rapidly chill asparagus after harvest to preserve freshness.
- Precision irrigation — Helps growers manage Oceana County's sandy soils.
- Improved disease management — Research has helped growers better manage crop diseases.
- Modern packing and refrigerated transportation — Help Michigan asparagus reach markets nationwide.
- Emerging automation technology — Researchers are developing camera-guided harvesting systems for asparagus production.

# From Ancient Rome to Oceana County: The Long History of Asparagus

Long before asparagus became one of Oceana County's signature crops, it was cultivated by ancient civilizations and prized across Europe.

Historians believe asparagus originated in the eastern Mediterranean more than 2,000 years ago. Ancient Egyptians, Greeks and Romans all valued the vegetable, with the Romans helping spread its cultivation throughout Europe. Roman emperor Augustus reportedly used the phrase "faster than cooking asparagus" to describe something done quickly.

By the Middle Ages and Renaissance,

asparagus had become associated with fine dining and wealthy households in countries such as France, Germany and England. Germany's seasonal white asparagus tradition, known as "spargel," remains popular today.

European settlers later brought asparagus to North America, where it thrived in Michigan's sandy soils and moderate climate. By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, commercial asparagus farming had expanded across West Michigan, particularly in communities near Lake Michigan.

Over time, Oceana County became na-

tionally known for asparagus production. The region's combination of sandy soil, cool spring temperatures and generations of farming knowledge helped establish the county as one of the leading asparagus-producing areas in the United States.

During harvest season, asparagus fields across the county become a familiar sign of spring. Local farms employ seasonal workers, ship fresh asparagus across the country and supply processors, retailers and farmers markets throughout the region.

The crop's influence can also be seen

in local traditions. The National Asparagus Festival has celebrated the county's agricultural heritage for decades with parades, community events, entertainment and asparagus-themed activities that draw visitors from across Michigan and beyond.

Today, asparagus remains both an economic driver and cultural symbol for Oceana County. While modern growers continue adapting to new technology and changing agricultural practices, the crop's deep local roots remain tied to a history that stretches all the way back to ancient Rome.



## Here's to a Great 2026 Asparagus Season

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# Pint-sized fun: National Asparagus Festival offers plenty for kids

While asparagus may be the star of the show, the annual also offers plenty of family-friendly activities for children throughout the weekend.

From bounce houses and games to parades and hands-on activities, the festival has long been known as a community event designed for all ages. Families visiting downtown Hart during the festival will find a variety

of attractions geared toward keeping younger visitors entertained.

One of the main attractions for children this year is the festival's Kidz Zone area on State Street, featuring activities such as bounce houses, a climbing tower, power jump, axe throwing, a dunk tank and interactive games.

The popular Grand Parade remains

one of the biggest draws for families. Children often line the streets to collect candy and watch floats, marching bands, community groups, farm equipment and festival royalty make their way through downtown Hart.

The festival includes a variety of interactive activities for children and families throughout the weekend. The Kidz Zone on State Street will feature

attractions including a bounce house, climbing tower, power jump, axe throwing and a dunk tank, while the new asparagus eating contest during the Friday night kickoff event is expected to draw crowds of spectators.

For many Oceana County families, attending the National Asparagus Festival has become a tradition passed down through generations.

# From Crown to Harvest: The Lifecycle of Asparagus

Across western Michigan, asparagus is a signature spring crop with a lifecycle unlike most vegetables. Rather than being replanted each year, asparagus is a perennial crop that can produce for 15 to 25 years or more.

Most commercial asparagus begins from crowns — underground root systems planted in sandy soil. During the first year or two, growers focus on establishing strong roots and crowns rather than harvesting heavily. Once mature, fields can produce spears each spring for several weeks.

As soil temperatures warm in

spring, asparagus spears emerge rapidly from the crown, sometimes growing several inches in a single day during warm weather. Spears are harvested before the tips begin to open.

After harvest season ends, the plants are allowed to “fern out,” producing tall, feathery green growth throughout the summer. This stage is critical because the fern stores energy in the underground crown for the following year’s crop.

Asparagus plants are either male or female. Female plants produce red seed berries, while

male plants typically produce more spears. Many modern commercial varieties are all-male hybrids developed for stronger yields.

In fall, the fern turns yellow and dies back as the plant enters winter dormancy. Nutrients move back underground into the crown, where the plant remains dormant until spring returns and the cycle begins again.

The sandy soils and lake-influenced climate of Oceana and Mason counties have helped make the region one of Michigan’s best-known asparagus-growing areas.



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