



Diseases of Asparagus in Oklahoma

John P. Damicone
Extension Plant Pathologist

Introduction

Asparagus is a well-adapted vegetable for Oklahoma and can be a valuable commercial crop in the state. Asparagus is perennial, and a planting may remain productive for over 15 years. Spear size and yield will decrease after 12 to 15 years, but a planting should produce 2,500 pounds of spears per acre or more each year during the most productive period of the planting. Site selection and soil preparation for new plantings are discussed in OSU Extension Fact Sheet HLA-6018, Asparagus Production. Yield is dependent on the amount of nutrients (carbohydrates) stored in the root system and plant density in a field. Carbohydrates are produced by the previous season's fern growth and move into the roots as ferns age. Therefore, maintenance of vigorous growth from harvest until fern senescence in the fall is essential for maximizing yield.

Poor vigor can be caused by several stress factors which damage ferns or weaken crowns. These include an excessively long cutting period (4 weeks the first year of cutting and 8 weeks thereafter is recommended), insufficient water, weed competition, inadequate soil fertility, poorly drained soil, soil compaction, defoliation from larvae of the asparagus beetle, and diseases. This fact sheet is intended to provide asparagus producers with information necessary to identify and manage asparagus diseases of potential importance in Oklahoma.

Cercospora blight (*Cercospora asparagi*)

Cercospora blight is the most important disease of asparagus in Oklahoma. It can be particularly severe in the eastern half of Oklahoma where rainfall and humidity levels favor infection. The fungus over-winters on fern residues left on the soil, and spores produced on this debris infect ferns after harvest when conditions are favorable for infection. Favorable conditions include humidity of 95 percent or higher and average temperatures of 77 to 86°F. Symptoms first appear on lower portions of the ferns after row closure and periods of high humidity. Symptoms are small, oval, grey to tan lesions (spots) with reddish brown borders on the needles and small branches (Figure 1). Spores of the fungus are produced on the lesions and are dispersed by wind and rain. Development of the disease depends on rainfall and humidity levels during June to August. Browning progresses upward from the lower ferns as conditions favor spread of the disease. Entire ferns may be blighted by late July in a wet year. The disease results in reduced photosynthesis of affected ferns. Yield loss the following spring is a result of reduced crown vigor caused by the early defoliation. Repeated yearly defoliation by Cerco-

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spora blight weakens crowns and reduces stand productivity and longevity. First-year asparagus is rarely affected by *Cercospora* blight.

Control: An integrated approach is recommended for management of *Cercospora* blight. Implementation of several cultural practices will help provide partial control. Schedule overhead irrigations to allow thorough drying of the foliage before nightfall, or use drip or furrow irrigation to keep foliage dry. In eastern Oklahoma, utilization of a wider row spacing of six feet rather than the usual five will increase air movement to dry foliage and delay canopy closure. Rows should also be planted in a north-south direction to take advantage of prevailing southerly winds in drying foliage.

Research has shown that burning, but not tillage, of infested residue in the spring delays blight appearance by about one week. However, asparagus residue left on the soil is beneficial for soil conservation, reducing abrasion of emerging spears by wind-blown sand, and for maintaining organic matter content of soil.

Foliar applications of a fungicide recommended for control of *Cercospora* blight provide excellent control. In comparison to untreated plots, yield increases of 2,000 pounds per acre have been achieved in research plots in the harvest season following treatment the previous year with fungicide sprays. Three applications should be made at 3-week intervals beginning prior to row closure when the ferns are approximately 4 feet in height. Sprays should be applied in a sufficient volume of water to provide thorough coverage of the foliage. There are no known asparagus varieties resistant to *Cercospora* blight. Consult the latest edition of the OSU Extension Agents Handbook (E-832) for the latest list of fungicides recommended for *Cercospora* blight control.

Stem, Crown, and Root Rot—Decline (*Fusarium* spp.)

Stem, crown, and root rot are caused by pathogenic strains and species of a common soilborne fungus whose populations increase in soil cropped to asparagus. Symptoms of these diseases are seedling blight and stunting, yellowing, and death of plants in older plantings. Yellowing usually first appears in midsummer and on one or two ferns per plant. The bright yellow color of affected plants is in sharp contrast to remaining

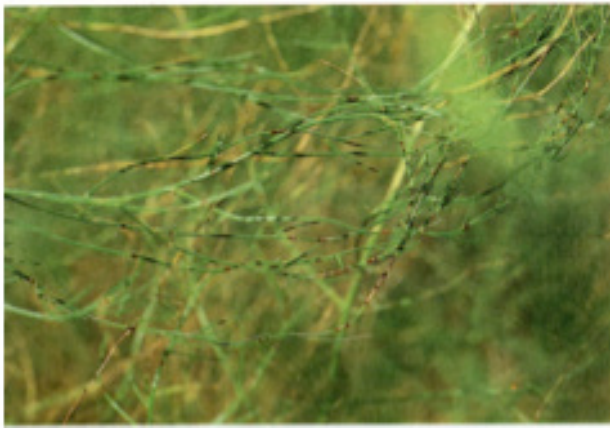


Figure 1. Symptoms of Cercospora blight.

green and healthy plants (Figure 2). Uprooting affected plants reveals a dark, reddish-brown decay of lower stems, crowns, and roots (Figure 3). Reddish-brown internal discoloration of crowns is evident when affected crowns are split with a knife. These crowns eventually decay completely and die.

“Decline” occurs when plant density in the field is reduced and vigor of remaining plants is diminished to the extent that maintenance of the stand is no longer profitable. When replanting affected sites is attempted, stand establishment is difficult and spear productivity is low. The severity of decline is increased by low soil pH, both excessive and insufficient soil moisture, high nitrogen levels, and by excessive cutting periods.

The fungi that cause stem, crown, and root rot persist in soil indefinitely. Diseased crowns and contaminated asparagus seeds are thought to be a means of introducing this disease into clean fields.

Control: Control of this disease is extremely difficult once it becomes established in a field. Therefore, measures should be taken to exclude it from fields. This is primarily done by planting healthy, vigorous crowns. For direct seeding, soak seeds in diluted chlorine bleach (1 pound of seed per gallon of a 1 part bleach/8 part water dilution) for 40 min., dry, and apply a fungicide seed treatment before planting. Consider



Figure 2. Yellowing of fern caused by Fusarium stem, crown, and root rot.



Figure 3. Symptoms of Fusarium stem and crown rot on a one-year old asparagus crown.

establishing beds with hybrid varieties that have some tolerance to Fusarium rather than with susceptible open-pollinated varieties. New fields should have good surface and internal water drainage and adequate nutrition provided before crowns are planted. Soil pH should be maintained between 6.5 and 7.5. Recommended pest, fertility, and irrigation management practices should be implemented to keep ferns actively growing throughout the season and to minimize stress. If the disease becomes serious, the field should be rotated away from asparagus. Re-establishment of asparagus should not be attempted in fields with a history of decline problems.

Rust (*Puccinia asparagi*)

Asparagus rust occurs to varying degrees wherever asparagus is grown. The fungus attacks developing ferns after cutting has been terminated. Rust may also develop on ferns allowed to develop during cutting. Rust appears first as raised, green spots (pustules) on stems and branches of developing ferns. Spores from these pustules re-infect ferns and produce brick-red pustules on stems and branches (Figure 4). A different spore type from these brick-red pustules also re-infects ferns and results in increased rust pressure. Rust is easily identified at this stage by observing the rust-colored



Figure 4. Brick-red pustules on a fern branch with rust. (Photo courtesy D. Johnson, Wash. State Univ.)

powdery mass of spores released from these pustules when rubbed against white paper or light-colored clothing. These red pustules turn black in color as the spots age. The black color is a result of the formation of dark-colored resting spores which over-winter and are capable of initiating the disease the following year. Conditions that favor rust development are periods of prolonged heavy dew formation and dry soil.

Damage caused by rust is a result of reduced crown vigor when plants are infected several years in succession. Severe infection over several years will greatly weaken crowns to the extent that yield is reduced.

Control: The best control measure is to plant rust-resistant varieties. Most of the newer hybrid varieties are rust resistant. If a susceptible variety is used, rows should be spaced six feet apart and oriented in a north-south direction to maximize air movement and drying down the rows. During harvest, cut all spears, fern growth and non-harvested plants to ground level or below. This will aid in breaking the disease cycle and may halt rust development. If rust appears on ferns after harvest, the fungicide spray schedule recommended for management of *Cercospora* blight will also provide rust control.

Other diseases:

Branchlet blight (*Alternaria* spp.)

Purple spot (*Stemphylium vesicarium*)

Branchlet blight and die-back are diseases occasionally caused by *Alternaria*, but the damage caused by the disease in Oklahoma is considered minor. *Stemphylium* causes purple spot of spears and fern branches. Losses from this disease are from spotting of spears which reduces marketability. Symptoms appear as lesions (spots) that have tan to gray



Figure 5. Purple spot symptoms on spears infected by the fungus *Stemphylium*. (Photo courtesy D. Johnson, Washington State Univ.)

centers and dark purplish borders (Figure 5). *Stemphylium* over-winters on fern residue. Spores that are released from infested residue initiate disease during spring. Purple spot can be severe during cool, wet springs. Twelve hours of wetness is necessary for infection and the disease is more severe with abrasion from wind-blown sand. Economic losses from purple spot have not yet occurred in Oklahoma.

Reference

Sherf, A.F. and MacNab. 1986. Vegetable diseases and their control, 2nd Ed., John Wiley & Sons, NY, 728pp.

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