Asparagus cochinchinensis **(Lour.) Merr.**

Liliaceae
Source of: tiān mén dōng 天门冬
Chinese asparagus tuber

Summary Description

This herbaceous, dioecious, full to part sun perennial resembles the asparagus fern houseplant (*A. sprengeri*). Hardy to Zone 5., the plant needs a support structure for its 4-5 foot long, slightly woody, climbing stems, more of which appear each year as the plant matures. The stems bear short needle-like side stems with the form and function of leaves (cladodes), plus short spines. Tiny bell-shaped greenish white flowers are borne in May or June, followed by quarter-inch pale green round berries in September. The berry becomes translucent when ripe, revealing one or two round black seeds within and resembling a fish eye.

Propagation

Plant seeds immediately for best results, otherwise this plant is a long-cycle germinator. A few fresh seeds may germinate readily, but most emerge after 15-18 months at temperatures varying from 40-70°F. Experiment with stratification techniques. Ripe berries will stay moist for months in cool storage. Remove black seeds from pulp, plant in 72-cell deep trays and keep moist. Keep trays going for two years. Seedlings may be transplanted into larger pots and held for a season or more. Attempts at propagation from tubers have not yielded positive results to date.

Cultivation

Plant sturdy seedlings in full sun to 2 hours shade, average well-drained soil, at a 24-inch radius. Mulch well with straw or leaves, but the plant seems little affected by drought. Train emerging stems to 4-foot plant stakes to encourage flowering and fruiting. Tomato spirals have worked well as support structures. More stems emerge from the crown each year as the plant ages; the number of tubers increases proportionally. After tops have browned off in autumn, clip to stubs.

Harvest & Processing

Five or more years will yield an abundant tuber harvest. The cylindrical or spindle-shaped, yellow brown tubers are approximately ¾-inch in diameter, 1-2 inches long and dry to half that length. Consult with licensed AOM professionals on the best processing methods which may involve blanching to remove the skin and coring the tubers. Processing would most likely take place in a commercial kitchen with supervision.

References

Flora of China: http://www.efloras.org/florataxon.aspx?flora_id=2&taxon_id=200027560
Bensky *Materia Medica* page: 825

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