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# THE ROADSIDE DIARIES

## ASPARAGUS MAN

*Wells Homestead Acres uses the succulent green spears to get a jumpstart on business.*

BY E.L. WYVES

RIVERHEAD—In 1980, when Lyle Wells took over the farm in Riverhead that had been in his family since the mid-1600s, he couldn't use the name "Wells Farm." It was already claimed by his cousin across Phillips Lane. So, he came up with "Wells Homestead Acres"—a name that conveys the legacy of one of the East End's oldest farms, while implying an optimistic and seemingly endless expansion of the planted area.

Wells could have easily slipped in the word "asparagus." With 15 acres of the lily that yields succulent spears (and many more on the way), Wells Homestead Acres is by far the East End's largest producer of asparagus, the region's first big delicacy to come out of the newly warmed soil. And, although Wells raises more than just asparagus on his 85 acres, asparagus is arguably the crop that defines the farm's modern fate.

Asparagus wasn't his first choice. A newly planted field of asparagus generally takes six years to begin to yield consistently. And while asparagus may seem like a no-fuss crop, Wells notes that its planting and harvesting are time-intensive. "It's a tremendous expense to pick, grade, clean, and pack," he said. "You can put together a box of cabbage in five minutes. A box of asparagus takes 45 minutes." With a background in agricultural business management, Wells has analyzed the costs and revenue of nearly every crop grown on the East End, and raised everything, from melons to grains to hogs, in past seasons. He concluded that "in the end, it's all pretty much a wash." (His only regret is not planting more privet and other landscaping plants, although he presides over an impressive row of hedge along his farm's eastern border.)

As a new farmer, Wells wanted a crop that could sustain him outside of the typical summer season of potatoes, cauliflower, and cabbage. He considered Christmas trees to extend his income deeper into the winter. He eventually settled on asparagus—an early-sprouting crop that became the equivalent of a cash advance each season. "It's better than having to go to the bank in May or June for loans to plant your summer crop," he said.

Such business planning has come to define Wells Homestead Acres. For instance, Wells once raised as many as 100 different vegetables at once, including 20 types of tomatoes and five types of beans, a level of diversity that worked for roadside stands and small deliveries to many customers. But Wells, who is the vice president of the Long Island Market Authority and is supporting the launch of a new e-commerce site for Long Island produce, had his sights on larger game. By 1995, he'd consolidated the mix into a successful



Lyle Wells demonstrates the harvester that he and two companions will use to cut 10,000 pounds of asparagus each day starting in mid-May.

suite of both golden and green zucchini, Kirby cucumbers, cut flowers, and a growing acreage of asparagus that he sold to King Kullen, J. Kings foodservice and other large food buyers on the Island. And he's confident that these markets can absorb everything he grows.

This year, he's adding another six acres of the green spears—plowing deep trenches where he carefully lays down the young, spreading asparagus roots at a cost of about \$3000 an acre. He plans to add 10 next year. "I'm always looking for land to lease for 15 to 20 years," he said. "That's the life of a good asparagus patch."

Look at a good asparagus crop and you're seeing all males. Commercial asparagus varieties are male hybrids, which do not put out any seeds, since the non-reproductive part of the plant is what yields the stalks that we eat. "The male seems to be a better survivor, in this case," Wells joked, hinting at a whole routine of asparagus-related gender commentary.

According to the California Asparagus Commission, the plant derives its name from the Persian word for "sprout" and has been cultivated for more than 2,000 years. The Greeks and Romans used

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# NORTH FORK



**WHAT:** Wells Homestead  
**WHERE:** 460 Rte. 25 (Main Rd.),  
Aquebogue, 722-3786  
**WHEN:** Daily 9 a.m.-6 p.m.  
**MUST TRY:** Asparagus, squash, Kirby cukes

it to prevent bee stings, sooth toothaches, and stimulate sex drive. The Chinese still prize candied asparagus. And white asparagus (the tougher, but more delicately flavored, sun-deprived stalks favored by most of the world) festivals welcome the spring across Europe. Wells has got only praise for the crop, mentioning its versatility in the kitchen and its high content of folic acid and glutathione, a micronutrient important in reproduction and fighting cancer. “The only detrimental thing you can say about it is the way your piss smells when you eat it,” he said.

By late April, Wells’s asparagus patches look just like a freshly planted potato field: endless furrows in a milk chocolate sea. Weeks ago, he removed the dill-like ferns that form after asparagus season and collect sunlight to feed the prolific roots during most of the

year. (During the winter, the ferns reduce erosion and funnel water to the underground plants.)

In some places, the fields are a shade darker, indicating the manure that Wells has recently spread. “We’re manure deficient,” he said, noting this light, airy fertilizer and mulch means more spears and thicker spears. Wells relies mostly on manure from nearby horse and duck farms. “Duck is my preference,” he said. “I always ask the folks at Crescent to make sure to squeeze their birds well before they slaughter them.” Heavy mulching also keeps down weeds, since asparagus roots tend to wander, and dragging a plow over the rows can destroy the plants. (Wells uses herbicides in particularly weedy patches, but knows these days are numbered by creeping regulation. He just invested in a new manure spreader and he’s looking into propane torches for weed control.) “When we’re working asparagus fields, I always say, one screw up means we have to live with it for 20 years,” said Wells. “So don’t screw up.”

As early as late April, small tufts of asparagus sprout at his field’s warmest patches. For efficiency’s sake, Wells does not start picking until there are large patches of plants six inches or taller. By May, he’s picking every other day, and every day in June. Picking is done six people at a time, with three perched on two harvesters. The machines ride just above the ground and the pickers sit side by side in bucket seats with boards nearby for stacking the cut stalks.

The Long Island asparagus season falls conveniently after the big harvests from California, Mexico and Michigan, and picks up just as the New Jersey harvest is petering out. “It ends in June,” he said, with a fake whimper. “I wish it didn’t end. We’d make a ton of money. The price is always twice as much in July.”

Still, asparagus typically inaugurates the East End’s farmstand season as customers looking for veggie and flower seedlings end up buying some spinach, mesclun, and asparagus. “Everybody is looking for that first spring crop,” he said. “It’s nice because the enthusiasm for local product is definitely at its high. People are tired of food from Chile and Peru in the supermarkets. The demand for fresh spinach and asparagus is good and strong.”

Always thinking about meeting this demand, Wells has been considering pickled asparagus (dilly asparagus) and asparagus guacamole to handle his seconds, including any plants that are too small or too bent or come in too early or too late in the season. The farm might harvest 10,000 pounds on a given day in May before farmstands have opened.

This inclination to use every bit of every crop already extends to some of Wells’s other ventures. For instance, during the zucchini season, he first markets the small fruit with the flower attached as courgettes, then larger zucchinis as they mature, and finally the blossoms (which he recommends stuffed with goat cheese, dipped in tempura batter and fried) later in the season. As a former hog farmer, Wells jokes about the old saying that the pork industry uses every part of the pig but the squeal. “That’s what I want to do with asparagus.” □