

# Asparagus farmers balance bigger yields, higher costs

Industry still searching for mechanization options

By MATTHEW WEAVER  
Capital Press

PASCO, Wash. — If you want to make an asparagus farmer wince, ask for the skinny stuff.

Some celebrity chefs have incorrectly called it “baby asparagus,” but the size of the asparagus has nothing to do with age, said farmer Gary Larsen.

“If you want the flavor of asparagus, get the bigger, the fatter ones,” he said. “For the ultimate eating pleasure, go with the bigger ones.”

Farmers also receive less for skinnier spears.

“All of us asparagus growers just cringe when people say you want the skinny stuff,” he said. “I send it in, but I get very little for it and you see the stores selling it for \$3.99.”

Based near Pasco, Larsen is one of roughly 45 to 60 farmers in Washington raising asparagus on a total of 4,000 to 4,500 acres. He is chairman of the Washington Asparagus Commission.

Larsen started harvesting on



Matthew Weaver/Capital Press

Experienced cutters tend to leave large, flat spears of asparagus like this for good luck, farmer Gary Larsen said. They can grow up to 6 feet tall, he said. “Every once in a while you’ll see somebody cut it, but it’s usually probably a new cutter that doesn’t know the rules,” Larsen said.

his 325 acres about April 8, a typical start, but later than some seasons when he’s been able to start the last week of March, he said. Harvest will continue until about June 1.

About 120 workers were in Larsen’s fields. At the height of the season, the number will peak at 150 workers.

Labor is more than 55 percent of Larsen’s expenses, he said. The industry won’t feel the full effects of a requirement



Matthew Weaver/Capital Press

Asparagus farmer Gary Larsen inspects wind damage to some of his crop April 18. Larsen hopes to reach a yield of 15,000 pounds per acre on his land this year.

to provide paid sick leave until next year, he said.

Cutters typically arrive on Larsen’s farm for the day at 2 a.m., and finish about 10 or 11 a.m. They wear headlamps while they work. The workers set the hours, Larsen said.

“If they’re not here by five o’clock, that’s late,” he said.

The industry has discussed mechanization, but is still searching for options, Larsen said. A nearby company’s mechanical harvester shows promise, but hasn’t

entered the marketplace.

Such machinery would cost \$500,000, he estimated. Larsen said he would need three, plus a spare.

“With asparagus, you’ve got to cut it every day,” he said.

Asparagus is a perennial crop. Fields can go for 12 to 13 years, but have reached 18 years, Larsen said.

The plant can grow several inches per day, Larsen said, and 10 inches in hotter weather.

Asparagus seed costs roughly \$1,000 per pound. The tiny,

BB-like seed is planted 9-10 inches deep. It costs roughly \$2,500 per acre just for seed, Larsen said. The year is off to a slow start due to weather, but should pick up, said Hector M. Lopez, foreman at Larsen’s farm. Insect and disease pressure could increase with hotter weather in May.

Larsen’s fields typically yield more than 10,000 pounds per acre, but he hopes to reach 15,000 pounds per acre this year. “We’re going to try,” Lopez said.

Newer varieties make it possible, Larsen said. When he first started raising asparagus in 1985, good yields were 3,000 pounds an acre and farmers hoped to reach 6,000 pounds. That yield wouldn’t fly economically today with the higher minimum wage for workers to cut the spears.

Mexican asparagus in grocery stores goes for roughly \$4.99 per pound in Seattle and \$3.99 per pound in Pasco. Purple asparagus — a sweeter option that turns green when cooked — was \$9 per pound in Seattle, Larsen said. He has about an acre of purple asparagus.

For farmers to break even, they need to receive about 80 cents per pound, Larsen says. How much they receive depends on whether they pack the asparagus themselves or sell it to a shipper-packer.

Larsen’s son, Tanner, 22, hopes to take over the operation by the time he’s 25 or 26. He grades the crop and works as a mechanic on the farm’s trucks.

Tanner doesn’t foresee doing things much differently from his father.

“Eventually, you do have to make changes,” he said. “But right now, what we’re doing works. There’s no point in changing anything.”



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Steve Van Vleet, Agriculture and Natural Resources Extension Educator, presents the “Bug Man” program to 4-H members.

Students get an up-close look at insects thanks to the 4-H “Bug Man” program.

## Welcome to the world of Washington 4-H

Welcome to the World of 4-H where opportunities are limitless and young leaders emerge ready to tackle everyday challenges.

When most people think about 4-H, they think about the four H’s- Head, Heart, Hands and Health. These four simple words are incorporated into every 4-H project and youth development experience.

Many people have the visual of young people living out in the country raising an animal or growing a garden. Even though this is true for many youth enrolled in the Washington State University Extension 4-H Program, youth have over 100 projects to select from and learn about. Broad categories for 4-H projects include: Animal Sciences; Engineering and Technology; Environmental Stewardship; Expressive Arts; Family and Consumer Sciences; Plant Sciences; Social Sciences and Interdisciplinary which includes Adventure Education.

To learn more about 4-H and youth development programs that Extension has to offer, continue reading. These programs range from the not-so-traditional to the traditional and provides a snap shot of the engaging opportunities available to youth in the 4-H Program.

### The Bug Man Program

Each year, Steve Van Vleet, Agriculture and Natural Resources Extension Educator, is asked by the Whitman County Library System to give a talk to kids about bugs. Entomology is a project area under Plant Sciences. Steve is very obliging and the kids love the “Bug Man.” To learn about bugs, Steve has several oversized bugs that he brings plus live cockroaches and a cockroach race track. Yes, the kids actually put the cockroaches (and sometime crickets) in the marked lanes and encourage them to move until they cross the finish line! It is very exciting for the kids. Steve presents this program at most of the libraries in Whitman County. Often his audience exceeds 50 kids of all ages and the girls like the bug talk just as much as the boys!

### Youth Field Days

Focusing on our agricultural and livestock traditions, enrollment in the market animal project is very high. These projects include beef, sheep, swine and market goats. To help 4-Hers, parents and leaders learn about these projects, Extension faculty and staff from Asotin and Whitman counties in Washington and Nez Perce County in Idaho come together to plan and organize regional youth Beef, Swine and Sheep & Goat Field Days. March is selected as an ideal month to hold the field days as it is before the fair season starts, before youth get their project animals and there is a short break in the school sports schedule. These field days feature topics such as health care, feeding and

nutrition, fitting and showing, judging, low stress animal handling, quality assurance, carcass evaluation and so much more.

For a nominal registration fee, participants receive lunch and an information packet. This past March, 88 youth and adults attended the Beef Field Day at the Lewiston Livestock Market and 125 attended the Swine Field Day at Asotin County Fairgrounds. Presenters for the field days include extension faculty, staff and 4-H volunteers, Veterinarians from the WSU Vet School and private industry, industry representatives and student groups from University of Idaho and WSU. The planning committee includes: Mark Heitstuman, WSU Extension Educator, Asotin and Garfield Counties, Kathee Tiffit and Judy Floch, Faculty and staff from University of Idaho Extension in Nez Perce County and Janet Schmidt, WSU Extension in Whitman County.

### 4-H Robotics

And they are off! The 4-H Team 4061 picks up a block, moves it to the switch and scores again! This is the sixth year that the 4-H program in Whitman County has had a 4-H high school robotic team, known as 4-H Palouse Area Robotic Team (P.A.R.T.) SciBorgs 4061. Youth on this team are enrolled in 4-H and F.I.R.S.T., which stands for For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology. Youth across the world engaged in FIRST Robotics Competition (FRC) have a very intense six-week build time where youth working side by side with mentors, design, build and program a 120 pound robot to play a game. Each year the theme for the game is different. Youth are divided into design teams, electrical engineering teams, mechanical engineering teams, programming teams and business teams. Youth learn valuable STEM skills which has a strong influence upon their college and career choices. In March, the 4-H SciBorgs competed at a high school near Spokane where they made it to the semi-finals. They are ranked 9th in the Pacific Northwest Region out of 156 teams. They earned the Engineering Inspiration Award for their community outreach and advancement in science education. When at competitions, youth model “gracious professionalism” and “coopertition”. Other robotic activities include summer robotic camps for youth 8-12 years and FIRST Lego League for youth 9-14 years of age.



Photos courtesy of Janet Schmidt/WSU Extension

An insect race track is part of the “Bug Man” program.

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