



# Spearheading responsible farming

A tradition of quality at Durst Organic Growers in Esparto.

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PHOTOS BY DEBBIE CUNNINGHAM  
AND COURTESY OF DURST ORGANIC GROWERS

**A**sparagus time always is exciting at Durst Organic Growers, a sprawling farm amid a background of rolling hills in the Yolo County town of Esparto. But this year, the anticipation is even greater than usual. The farm is harvesting asparagus from 200 acres instead of 100, doubling its yield.

That's great news for all the folks who love Durst asparagus, which the farm has been offering for more than 20 years.

"We were comfortable where we were, but we could never meet the markets. In order to do that, we've stepped into a level of growth," says Jim Durst, who owns and runs the farm with his wife, Deborah.

As with all the fruits and vegetables the Dursts grow on 900 acres — including heirloom and cherry tomatoes, watermelons and mixed melons, peas, and winter squash — what counts the most is flavor.

"If it doesn't taste good, there's no use in growing it," Deborah says. "That's really part of our philosophy."

The quest for flavor leads the Dursts to constantly experiment in search of the best breeds, which they grow on a trial basis in small quantities before expanding them to full field production. They grow dozens of varieties of much of their produce. Regarding asparagus, the Dursts have stuck with the same breed they started with — atlas, simply because they believe it's the best.


## RAISING STANDARDS

Trialing and taking baby steps with expansion have been the Dursts' approach since they started growing organically in the 1980s on land the Durst family had farmed for generations. At the time, most organic farming was being done on the East Coast and in the Midwest. The Dursts had to figure out how to do it in an arid climate.

Along the way, the Dursts have embraced new technologies — in particular, drip irrigation for providing both water and nutrients, and sap sampling, which offers analysis of the health and nutrient level of each plant.

But the Dursts don't just grow food, they grow community. They donate to area food banks — they even grow extra produce for that purpose — and Jim is a board member of the Yolo Food Bank. They spearheaded a program to clean up alleyways in the town of Esparto to make them walker friendly. And they take pride in offering their employees good pay and working conditions that protect their health and safety.

For the Dursts, how they farm and how they live are interconnected.

"We believe that our role in agriculture is to steward the soil and the environment," Jim says. "That's really what drives our passion for organic production, because it's a system of agriculture whereby the health of the soil is related to the health of the plant, the health of the plant is related to the health of the environment, and all of it is related to the health of the consumer. So it's a circle that I think brings health to our planet." 

Joan Fischer is a freelance writer based in Roseville. Until recently, she served as editor of *Grow*, the flagship magazine of the University of Wisconsin – Madison College of Agricultural and Life Sciences.

## RESOURCES

You can find Durst Organic Growers asparagus at the following stores in the Greater Sacramento area:

Whole Foods Market, Raley's, Corti Brothers, Davis Food Co-op — and sometimes Nugget Markets and Sprouts.

*Turn the page for asparagus tips*

A Durst Organic Growers farm worker harvests asparagus



### COOKING ASPARAGUS

The best recipe is the simplest. Coat a bunch of asparagus with about 2 tablespoons olive oil and put on a 400 degree F grill for about 5 to 10 minutes with the lid on, turning occasionally and checking for doneness (you can put the asparagus on a foil sheet if you wish). Top with flaked Maldon sea salt and, if desired, crumbled cheese, toasted nuts or seeds, chopped herbs (marjoram, thyme, oregano), or fresh lemon juice. If you don't use a grill, 20 minutes in a baking dish in the oven at 400 degrees F will work. The asparagus still should have a light crunch when eaten.



### ASPARAGUS TIPS

- Larger asparagus is sweeter and easier to cook without overcooking. Pencil-thin asparagus is not baby asparagus, just skinny asparagus.
- Use your asparagus as soon as possible; during storage, the sugars convert to carbohydrates, making the spears starchy and less sweet.
- Asparagus should be stored in the fridge in a damp cloth or paper towel in order to keep it hydrated and avoid wilting.
- If your asparagus does start to dry out or get limp, you can trim the bottoms and submerge them in a cup or bowl of cool water.





Jim and Deborah Durst organically farm on 900 acres in Yolo County