

Race to harvest the asparagus avalanche

By **Claire Ellicott**

IF you love asparagus, you'll be licking your lips at this year's bumper crop of the quintessentially British vegetable.

But the delicacy – rumoured to be on the menu at today's royal wedding breakfast – has arrived in such unprecedented abundance and so early that growers have had to work flat out to harvest it and meet demand.

Many of the teams hired to hand-pick the fast-growing vegetable during its short season hadn't started work when the green spears raised their heads more than two weeks ahead of schedule this month thanks to the warm spring.

Growers said they had never known it to be so early or so plentiful. John Chinn, who grows asparagus on 800 acres in the Wye Valley, said his crop had arrived like a 'tidal wave' and it had been a struggle to harvest it all.

The asparagus season in Britain begins officially on St George's Day, April 23, and lasts until June 24, Midsummer's Day.

However, this year some asparagus began to appear at the beginning of April and many growers have reported a tenfold increase in the volume of their crop.

It means that the major supermarkets are able to stock only British

asparagus, compared with this time last year when 95 per cent had to be imported after a cold, wet winter meant most of the homegrown crop failed to appear before May.

Chris Kitchen, a Lincolnshire-based grower with more than 25 years of experience, said his crop had arrived 17 days early – the earliest he'd ever known it.

'To have such an abundance of asparagus so early in the season is incredible,' he added. 'In all my years of growing I've never seen anything like it.' Mr

Chinn, who supplies Marks & Spencer, said: 'The open-field crop was ready nearly two weeks earlier than normal.'

'The flavour is beautiful this year and we're harvesting more spears than we would normally have harvested by June.'

'We've had to work extended hours, but we've kept up with the crop. You have to harvest at least once every day, but we're loving it.'

Mr Chinn, who has previously supplied asparagus to the Queen, said

he had received a large order from a likely supplier to the royal household and was 'living in hope' that his asparagus would be making an appearance at today's wedding.

Grower George Moule, from Hartlebury, Worcestershire, said: 'We use workers from Eastern Europe and had booked them to fly over much later. We've never cut asparagus here in March before, but the stuff we grow under plastic was ready. Luckily, we managed to rope a couple of people in to tide us over.'





THE QUEEN OF VEGETABLES

■ Asparagus is an aphrodisiac and in the 19th century three courses of the vegetable were served to bridegrooms

■ The 'proper' way to eat it is with your fingers according to etiquette guide Debrett's - even the Queen eats it this way

■ It is part of the lily family and was called 'sparrow grass' in the 17th century

■ Asparagus is known around the world as the 'queen of vegetables'

■ During the British season we eat an average of 4.6million spears each day

■ It can grow six inches in 24 hours on a warm day, sometimes more, and turns from white to green only when it hits the sunlight

■ Asparagus has no fat, no cholesterol and is low in sodium

