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By Michael Barker

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## New season asparagus hits Waitrose

Supermarket says warmer temperatures and better light levels mean Gijnlim variety is ready for sale earlier this year



**W**aitrose has claimed victory in the race to stock the first new-season British asparagus, eight weeks ahead of the usual peak season.

The bumper crop of British asparagus has been grown by Sandy Booth on his farm in the New Forest, where the increased light levels and warmer temperatures naturally found on the south coast allowed for the crop to be harvested earlier this year.

The early British asparagus went into selected Waitrose stores from Wednesday 24 February, before being available nationwide by mid/end of March.

Vegetable buyer Lucy Broughton said: "We're thrilled to be able to offer our customers home-grown British asparagus earlier than usual. For us, this marks the start of spring and we hope that customers will be excited by the fact that spring is finally on its way."

Grown for Waitrose on the south coast of England, Gijnlim is a variety that is available earlier due to advanced growing techniques and south-coast climate.

The asparagus is grown in raised beds covered by a combination of black and white fleece tunnels over each bed to increase the plants' core temperature. The substrate is also covered on the sides with black ground cover and a very thin black membrane which protects the spears from the cold while also capturing and retaining the heat from the winter sunshine, the supermarket explained.

The substrate warms up quicker than soil, hence the earlier production, and a layer of sand over the soil gives two benefits in the shape of maintaining soil temperature and allowing the spears to emerge more easily and clean of any soil.

Asparagus has continued to rise in popularity among consumers, with Waitrose reporting that annual searches for the spring vegetable are up 667 per cent on Waitrose.com. The new-season crop is selling for £3.50 for 200g.

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