

Three Sisters Garden

traditional Native American planting of corn, beans & squash

The three sister garden is a Native American method of agriculture using a system known as companion planting in which corn, beans, and squash plants benefit from being grown close to each other.

Traditionally the plantings are made in rounded mounds of soil. Along the Atlantic Northeast coast small fish caught in fishweirs in the late spring were buried in these mounds to fertilize the soil.

Corn is the oldest sister. She stands tall in the center, and provides support for the beans.

Squash is the next sister. She grows over the mound, protecting her sisters from weeds, shading the soil from the sun with her leaves keeping it cool and moist. The spiny hairs of the vines deter pests.

Beans are the third sister. She climbs through squash and then up corn to bind all together as she reaches for the sun. Beans help keep the soil fertile by converting the sun's energy into nitrogen filled nodules that form on its roots. As the beans grow the nitrogen is food for the roots of the corn.

Early Colonists in North America survived through their first winters on corn and beans grown and stored by the local Native American people. When eaten together corn and beans help provide balanced protein in the diet.



How to grow a Three Sisters Garden

In mid-Spring clear a sunny garden area of grasses, weeds, and large stones. The area should be roundish in shape and at least eight feet across. Cover the area with a few inches of compost or well rotted manure. Turn the compost in to loosen the ground and create a moisture retaining growing medium with increased fertility. Water it well. Check the growing area frequently over the next few weeks to remove any sprouted weeds.

In late-Spring sow about seven or eight corn seeds in the center of the growing circle, in a ring pattern, spaced out about six inches from each other. Plant the corn seeds an inch under the soil, firm the soil above by patting it down with the palm of your hand. Water the growing mound well. The corn will sprout and begin to grow in about two weeks.

After the corn has grown to about ten inches high, using a hoe or hand trowel, pull up some soil from the growing mound around the base of the corn stalks. The corn should not be buried entirely, it's upper half should be above the soil that has been mounded around it's stems. The corn will send roots into the mounded soil to hold it steady and upright in the wind.

After mounding soil around the base of the corn stalks sow about a dozen pole bean seeds in a ring pattern six inches outside the corn stalks. Push the bean seeds about an inch under the soil and firm the ground above them by patting it down with your hand. Water the growing mound well. The beans will usually begin to sprout in about 7-14 days.

About a week after the beans sprout, sow six or seven squash seeds in a ring about 12-15" outside the beans. Push the squash seeds about an inch under the soil and firm the ground above them by patting it down with your hand. The squash seeds will sprout in about a week.

As the corn grows the beans will begin to climb, you can help them early on by wrapping the bean vines around the corn stalks. The squash will begin to grow it's vines and the large squash leaves will soon cover the growing mound and shade its soil. On occasion help the squash continue to cover the mound by turning the ends of it's vines towards the center of the mound. Water the mound well during weeks where there has been little or no rain.

When to harvest a Three Sister's Garden?

Corn may be harvested while in its *green corn* stage, but traditionally it is left to ripen and is harvested in Autumn. The cob is sun dried and stored for winter use. To harvest green corn observe the silky threads coming from the tops of the ears, when the silk is dry and a dark brown color the corn may be harvested. To remove an ear of corn, hold the stalk a few inches below the ear. Pull the tip of the ear toward the ground until it snaps off.

Beans may be eaten fresh or allowed to mature and dry on the vine. Fresh beans can be harvested when the pods are firm and crisp, but before the seeds within the pods have begun to swell. Pick beans in late morning after the night-dew has dried from the plants. This helps to prevent the spread of bacteria which can harm the plants. Pick the beans carefully to avoid bruising or snapping the growing vines. Bean plants will continue to flower and more bean pods will develop if they are harvested before bean seeds can mature.

Squash should be picked only after its skin has hardened thoroughly. Be careful to not damage or break off the stem of the squash...this can wound the squash and it will begin to rot. Cut the stem 3-4" from the fruit with a sharp knife. Allow the squash to sit in the sun for a few days to cure and the stem to dry. Store squash in a single layer and not touching each other, which can foster rot. Squash can last at least two months, depending on the variety.

Enjoy growing your **Three Sisters Garden!**

(sources: AFP, ivillage garden web, RMS and others)



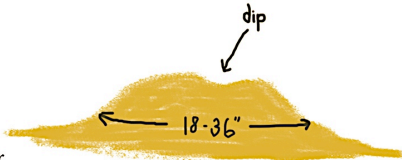
Follow a Native American tradition...

Make a three sisters garden!



1

Find a sunny place.
Wait till late spring when the danger of frost has passed.



2

Prepare the soil.*
Loosen it up with a rake then make a 12" high mound with a dip at the top so the water stays near the plant.

* Traditionally, Native peoples would use fish caught in the fishweir as food for the new plants.



3

Plant the corn seeds first.
Soak 4 to 6 corn seeds overnight then plant them about 6" apart in the center of the mound.



4

Plant the squash and beans.
One to two weeks later, when the corn is 4" high, soak and then plant six bean seeds (6" from corn) then plant four squash seeds (12" from the corn).



5

Take care of your garden.
Check your garden often and pull out the weeds, water the plants and add compost to help them grow.



6

Harvest your vegetables!
When full grown, pick the vegetables and try making some traditional Native American recipes. Save the seeds for next year!

