

The Three Sisters: Corn, Beans, and Squash

The Old Farmer's Almanac

BEFORE YOU READ:

1. Share what you know about gardening. For example, what plants go best together in the garden. And why do they go well together?
2. What natural fertilizers do you use? Do you remember your parents using them?
3. Read the title of this article and look at the images. What do you think this article will be about?

Corn, beans, and squash are called the “three sisters.” Native Americans always inter-planted this trio because they thrive together, much like three inseparable sisters.

By the time European settlers arrived in America in the early 1600s, the Iroquois had been growing the “three sisters” for over three centuries. The vegetable trio sustained the Native Americans both physically and spiritually. In legend, the plants were a gift from the gods, always to be grown together, eaten together, and celebrated together.

Each of the sisters contributes something to the planting. Together, the sisters provide a balanced diet from a single planting.



Image from <www.angelmounds.org/exhibits/garden>.



Try Growing the Three Sisters

In the spring, prepare the soil by adding fish scraps or wood ash to increase fertility. Make a mound of soil about 1 foot high and 4 feet wide. When the danger of frost has passed, plant the corn in the mound. Sow six kernels of corn 1 inch deep and about 10 inches apart in a circle that is 2 feet in diameter. When the corn is about 5 inches tall, plant 4 bean seeds, evenly spaced, around each stalk. A week later, plant 6 squash seeds, evenly spaced, around the mound.

As older sisters often do, the corn offers the beans needed support.

The beans, the giving sister, pull nitrogen from the air and bring it to the soil for the benefit of all three. As the beans grow through the tangle of squash vines and wind their way up the cornstalks into the sunlight, they hold the sisters close together.

The large leaves of the sprawling squash protect the threesome by creating living mulch that shades the soil, keeping it cool and moist and preventing weeds. The prickly squash leaves also keep away raccoons, which don't like to step on them.

Together, the three sisters provide both sustainable soil fertility as well as a healthy diet. Perfection!

The Old Farmer's Almanac has been published since 1792. Their "main endeavour is to be useful, but with a pleasant degree of humor." This article is reprinted with permission from <www.almanac.com/content/three-sisters-corn-bean-and-squash>.

AFTER YOU READ:

1. Explain in your own words the relationship between the three sisters.
2. Read about the "fourth sister" in the box on the right. Explain in your own words the role of the fourth sister.
3. What do you think about the idea that humans are an important participant in the relationship between the three sisters?
4. Define "reciprocity" in the context of what you have learned on these pages. What are more examples of reciprocity in nature? And between human and nature?
5. Watch this 2-minute video from the Chickasaw Nation: <www.chickasaw.tv/videos/three-sisters-working-with-nature>. And look for other short videos of interest.



The Fourth Sister



But wait. How did these three sisters find each other? Who noticed the ways that the "Three Sisters" help each other grow? Robin Wall Kimmerer, who is a scientist, writer, and member of the Potawatomi Nation, says there is a fourth sister. This sister was a farmer who "noticed the ways of each species and imagined how they might live together." Kimmerer is also a farmer. She says, "We are the planters, the ones who clear the land, pull the weeds, and pick the bugs; we save the seeds over winter and plant them again next spring. We are midwives to their gifts. We cannot live without them, but it's also true that they cannot live without us. Corn, beans, and squash are fully domesticated; they rely on us to create the conditions under which they can grow. We too are part of the reciprocity. They can't meet their responsibilities unless we meet ours... The gifts of each are more fully expressed when they are nurtured together than alone. In ripe ears and swelling fruit, they counsel us that all gifts are multiplied in relationship. This is how the world keeps going."

— Robin Wall Kimmerer
Braiding Sweetgrass