Indigenous Peoples

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.

**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.

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

— Robin Wall Kimmerer
Braiding Sweetgrass