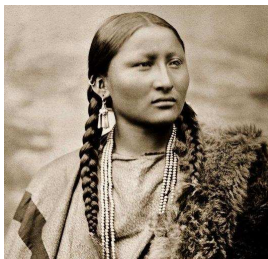


The Three Sisters: Corn, Beans, and Squash

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. Read the title and look at the images. What do you think this article will be about?
3. Study the vocabulary below, and then read the article. Then come back and study the vocabulary again.



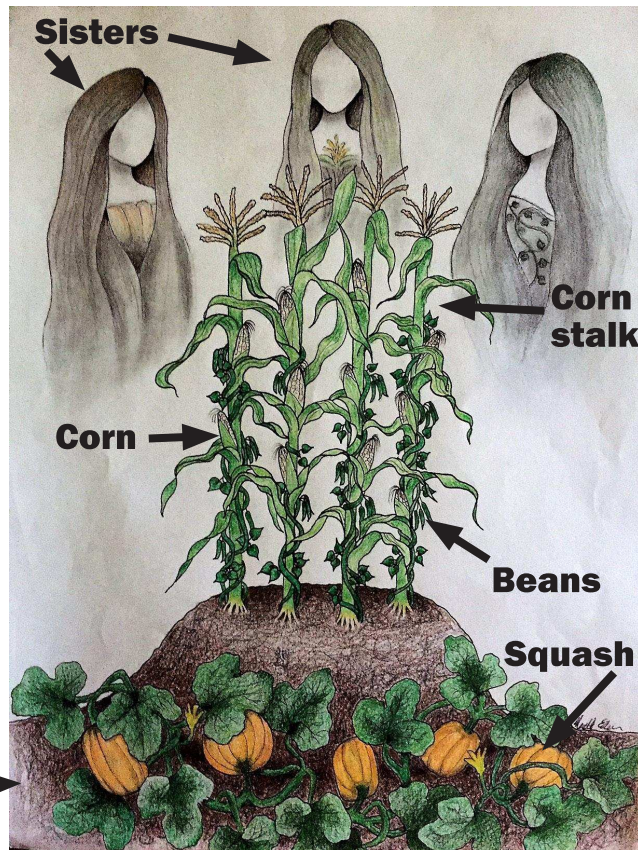
Native means the first people to live on a land.



Moist means a little bit wet.

Soil is dirt where plants grow.

Vocabulary



Raccoon



Nitrogen is a chemical that helps plants grow.



Prickly means sharp (like a cactus).

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Corn, beans, and squash are called the “three sisters.” Native Americans grow these three plants together. The plants grow well together. They are like sisters.

Each plant gives something to the other plants. The corn gives beans support. The beans climb up the corn stalk.

The beans, pull nitrogen from the air. They put the nitrogen in the soil. Nitrogen is an important food for the other plants.

The squash plant has large leaves. The large leaves give shade from the sun. The soil stays cool and moist. The leaves stop weeds from growing. The squash leaves are prickly. The raccoons do not like to step on the leaves.

Together, the three sisters give gifts to each other. Also, they give their gifts to us. Corn, beans, and squash are healthy foods for people. Perfect!



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

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 an adaptation of an article reprinted with permission from <www.almanac.com/content/three-sisters-corn-bean-and-squash>. The original version of that article is available in the Indigenous Peoples issue of The Change Agent.

AFTER YOU READ:

1. Explain in your own words the relationship between the three sisters. Read about the “fourth sister” on p. 8. Explain in your own words the role of the fourth sister.
2. “Reciprocity” means to give things to each other so that you all benefit. The three sisters experience reciprocity with each other, as does the fourth sister. What are more examples of reciprocity in nature? Share examples of reciprocity in your life.
3. 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: The Farmer



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 studied the plants 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 [need people] to create the conditions under which they can grow. We too are part of the reciprocity. [...] The gifts of each are more fully expressed when they are nurtured together than alone. [...] They counsel us that all gifts are multiplied in relationship. This is how the world keeps going.”

— Robin Wall Kimmerer
Braiding Sweetgrass

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.

