

The Three Sisters

Did you know that corn, beans, and squash are called the “**three sisters**”? Indigenous Communities interplanted this trio because they thrive together, much like three inseparable sisters.



Source: Cecelia Brooks

THE THREE SISTERS GARDEN

By the time European settlers arrived in America, Indigenous communities had been growing the “three sisters” for generations. 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 (a few missing nutrients are obtained from seeds or meat). (**Carbohydrates** from the corn, **protein** from the beans (and the missing amino acids in the corn) and **essential vitamins and minerals** from the squash).

- The older sister, corn, the supporting sister offers the beans needed support.
- The middle sister, beans, the giving sister takes nitrogen in the air and bring it to the soil for the benefit of all three, in other words they feed the soil.
- 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 youngest sister, squash, is the protecting sister, 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 and other pests.

Together, they provide both sustainable soil fertility as well as a healthy diet.

TIPS FOR GROWING THE THREE SISTERS

- In spring, if desired, prepare the soil by adding fish scraps (traditional) or compost to increase fertility.
- Make a mound of soil about a foot high and 3 feet wide.
- When the danger of frost has passed, plant the corn in the mound. Sow corn seeds an inch deep in a circle of about 1 foot in diameter. (goal: 4-5 plants growing, in roughly a square foot)
- When the corn is about 5 inches tall, plant bean seeds an inch deep, evenly spaced, around each stalk. About a week later, plant squash seeds an inch deep, evenly spaced, around the perimeter of the mound.

Optional: start corn indoors early and plant outside once danger of frost is past. Plant your mound at that time including bean seeds and squash (can also start squash early and plant at the same time) It is helpful to water well then mulch the soil after planting leaving room for beans to sprout and grow.

Other sisters

- Sister corn – flint corn varieties
- Sister bean – traditional varieties such as True Cranberry, Skunk Bean, dry beans
- Sister squash – Canada Crookneck
- Sister sunflower – particularly a variety with pure white seeds.
- Sister sunchoke or j-artichoke – perennial north American root vegetable.
- Sister ground cherry – self sows. Now considered a “*superfood*” by many.
- Brother tobacco – a variety native to the Northeast Kingdom. For ceremonial use.

Sources: [Catherine Boeckmann www.ecoliteracy.org](http://www.ecoliteracy.org)

Recipe:

- 1-2 onion, diced small
- 2-4 cloves garlic, minced
- 1-2 tsp herbs of choice (oregano, cumin, etc)
- 1 cup potatoes, diced evenly
- 2 cups squash, diced evenly
- 2 cups vegetable broth
- 1 - 15 oz can beans drained and rinsed
- Or ½ cup dried beans (soak overnight and cook prior to adding to soup if using tomatoes)
- 1 – 15 oz can corn, drained and rinsed or equivalent frozen or fresh from cob
- 1 – 15 oz can diced tomatoes (or fresh)
- 2 cups of water

In a large pot simmer onion in a small amount of broth until soft, add garlic and simmer. Add remainder of broth to pot with all remaining vegetables and additional water, simmer until tender. Add salt and pepper, garnish with parsley or cilantro if desired.

** Roasting the veggies first in oven drizzled with oil is a good option