



The Three Sisters

Native Americans passed along a life-sustaining gift, called the Three Sisters, to early European settlers. Three important crops: corn, beans, and squash, planted together, are called the Three Sisters. In many Native American communities, these three crops hold spiritual significance, as they are seen as gifts from the Great Spirit to sustain life on earth. Traditionally, ceremonies were performed at planting time as well as at the first harvest of corn, to honor the spirits who watched over the crops. Through these rituals, knowledge of the planting, harvesting, and preservation cycle, as well as a sense of reverence for these crops, was passed down through generations. Corn, beans, and squash complement each other as they grow. Corn stretches tall and thin, creating a pole for the beans. But corn is a heavy feeder and is also shallow-rooted, so it benefits from the Nitrogen fixed by bean plants, the stability provided from the winding bean vines, and the “living mulch” of the squash plants. Squash shades out weeds with its large leaves and keeps predators at bay with its spines.



A young gardener at Helen Faison harvesting popcorn from a Three Sisters planting.

Today, we know that science confirms what native peoples counted on from generation to generation: corn and beans together in a diet provide a complete protein. Squash adds vitamins from its flesh and healthy oils from seeds. The combination of all these crops creates a nutritionally diverse and sustaining diet. Three Sisters plantings are not only complimentary in the garden and in your diet – they are also beautiful! Here’s how to plan a Three Sisters planting for your garden:

1. Plant the corn first, when the soil has warmed to 65 degrees and danger of frost has passed. Plant the corn on a mound that is 18” across. The center of each mound should be 5 feet from the center of the next mound. Plant 4 corn seeds in a 6” square in the center of **every other** mound. Save the unplanted mounds for squash. *Please note that due to pollination needs, for full ears of corn, you will need to plant at least a 10’x10’ area.*
2. When the corn is 4-6” tall, plant the beans and squash. Plant a 6” square of 4 pole bean seeds, rotated to make a diamond between the corn stalks. Plant 3 vining squash seeds, 4” apart on the tops of the empty mounds. After germination, thin the squash to 2/mound. You will need to cultivate or weed until the squash plants grow and create enough shade to keep the weeds from thriving.

Tall corn varieties, pole beans, and vining squash work best for this type of planting. Here is a recipe from our Edible Schoolyard Program that includes the Three Sisters! [Three Sisters Soup – Recipe Card](#)