

The Three Sisters

A lesson from the New Jersey Agricultural Society's Learning Through Gardening Program

Objective: The student will be able to:

- Explain how Native Americans who lived in New Jersey planted their three major food crops to reduce the amount of work they had to do to grow them.
- Explain how corn, beans, and squash plants benefit when planted together.
- Compare legends Native Americans told about the Three Sisters.
- Explain how the Three Sisters helped the Pilgrims.

Grades: K-5

Materials:

large, 2-gallon plastic plant pots, one for each group (available for free from garden centers)
corn, pole green bean, and squash seeds (Be sure to buy pole green beans and not the 'bush' type. Pumpkin seeds can be used for squash.)

Potting or garden soil

Optional: Copies of The Three Sisters legends and The Pilgrims and the Three Sisters summary for each student.

Preparation:

In small groups, have the students plant corn seeds only in the middle of 2-gallon plant pots two weeks prior to this lesson. Four or five corn seeds planted in the middle of the pot is enough. Corn seeds take longer to germinate than the bean and squash seeds, so they should be given a head start.

Procedure:

Explain that the Native Americans who lived in New Jersey were called the Lenni Lenape. The Lenape had to get everything they used and ate from nature – they had to make clothes from animal hides, build houses from wood and bark, make tools from rocks and bones, and they had to hunt for or grow all their food. This means the Lenape had a lot of work to do everyday. Even the littlest children had jobs of chasing the birds and animals out of the gardens.

The Lenape ate three major food crops – corn, beans, and squash. They called these crops the Three Sisters. They planted them in a way that would make tending the garden much easier.

First, they planted the corn. Do you know what corn looks like when it's growing? (Have the children stand up



straight to look like a corn stalk.) Then they planted the beans in a circle around the corn so the beans will wind up the corn and they would not have to cut a piece of wood to make a stake for the beans. (Have the children act out the way the beans would grow around the corn stalk.) The beans also help the corn because beans leave a nutrient called nitrogen in the soil, and corn plants need a lot of nitrogen. The squash plants also used the nitrogen. Last, the Lenape planted the squash around the beans to push out the weeds and to shade the ground to keep the moisture in for all three plants. (Have the children act out the way the squash spreads out all over the garden.) Planting different crops together this way is called companion planting.

Draw a picture on the board to show the corn stalk, the beans growing around the corn stalk, and the squash spreading out from the beans all over the garden.

Explain that today when we go outside we are going to plant the Three Sisters in pots so that we can see how the corn, beans, and squash grow together. Earlier we planted the corn because the corn takes a little bit longer to grow. This week we are going to plant the beans and the squash.

In small groups (three to five), the students plant the Three Sisters in large 2-gallon plastic pots.

The Three Sisters Legends: Explain that native Americans often told stories or legends to explain things that were happening in nature.

For younger students: Read legend #1 and ask the students which sister represents which of the three plants. How do they know?

For older students: Ask students in small groups to read one of the Three Sisters legends. Ask the groups to retell the legend to the whole class and explain how the legend relates to the way the corn, beans, and squash grow together.

Evaluation:

The student can name the Three Sisters crops and describe how they were planted by Native Americans to reduce work in the garden.

There are many legends told by Native American people about the Three Sisters way of planting corn, beans, and squash together. Here are some of those legends.

The Three Sisters Legend #1

A long time ago there were three sisters who lived together in a field. These sisters were quite different from one another in their size and way of dressing.

The little sister was so young that she could only crawl at first, and she was dressed in green. The second sister wore a bright yellow dress, and she had a way of running off by herself when the sun shone and the soft wind blew in her face. The third was the eldest sister, standing always very straight and tall above the other sisters and trying to protect them. She wore a pale green shawl, and she had long, yellow hair that tossed about her head in the breeze.

There was one way the sisters were all alike, though. They loved each other dearly, and they always stayed together. This made them very strong.

After awhile a stranger came to the field of the three sisters, a little Mohawk boy. He was as straight as an arrow and as fearless as the eagle that circled the sky above his head. He knew the way of talking to the birds and the small brothers of the earth: the shrew, the chipmunk, and the young foxes.

The three sisters, the one who was just able to crawl, the one in the yellow frock, and the one with the flowing hair, were very much interested in the little Mohawk boy. They watched him fit his arrow in his bow, saw him carve a bowl with his stone knife, and wondered where he went at night.

Late in the summer of the first coming of the Mohawk boy to their field, one of the three sisters disappeared. This was the youngest sister in green, the sister who could only creep. She was scarcely able to stand alone in the field unless she had a stick to which she clung. Her sisters mourned for her until the fall, but she did not return.

Once more the Mohawk boy came to the field of the three sisters. He came to gather reeds at the edge of a stream nearby to make arrow shafts. The two sisters who were left watched him and gazed with wonder at the prints of his moccasins in the earth that marked his trail. That night the second of the sisters left, the one who was dressed in yellow and who always wanted to run away. She left no mark of her going, but it may have been that she set her feet in the moccasin tracks of the little Mohawk boy.

Now there was but one of the sisters left. Tall and straight she stood in the field not once bowing her head with sorrow, but it seemed to her she could not live there alone. The days grew shorter and the nights were colder. Her green shawl faded and grew thin and old. Her hair, once long and golden, was tangled by the wind. Day and night she sighed for her sisters to return to her, but they did not hear her. Her voice when she tried to call to them was low and plaintive like the wind.

But one day when it was the season of the harvest, the little Mohawk boy heard the crying of the third sister who had been left to mourn there in the field. He felt sorry for her, and he took her in his arms and carried her to the lodge of his father and mother.

Oh what a surprise awaited her there! Her two lost sisters were there in the lodge of the little Mohawk boy, safe and very glad to see her. They had been curious about the boy, and they had gone home with him to see how and where he lived. They had liked his warm cave so well that they had decided now that winter was coming on to stay with him. And they were doing all they could to be useful.

The little sister in green, now quite grown up, was helping to keep the dinner pot full. The sister in yellow sat on the shelf drying herself, for she planned to fill the dinner pot later. The third sister joined them, ready to grind meal for the Native boy. And the three were never separated again.

From <http://blogs.cornell.edu/garden/get-activities/signature-projects/the-three-sisters-exploringan-iroquois-garden/a-legend>

The Three Sisters Legend #2

There once was a family of a mother, father and three sisters. The parents worked hard at providing for the family, but constantly had to beg the daughters for help. They also had to continually stop them from arguing and fighting.

The three sisters were different from each other and also unique in their own way. The eldest was tall and slender with long, silky, shiny hair. The youngest was small, but muscular and attractive, and the middle sister was average in height and looks but was beautiful in her giving nature. For whatever reason, although they loved one another as sisters, they would disagree on any little thing and be distracted from doing any work because of these quarrels.

The parents tried and tried to get the sisters to help in the garden and help with the chores. When working together they would always fight; when apart they would complain about the others. The work wasn't getting done, and the parents were worried that if this kept up they wouldn't make it through another winter. It was planting time and the work had to be done, but as usual the sisters were too busy fighting.

The parents needed help, and it was given to them, but not as they imagined. As the sisters argued in the field they were transformed into three plants. The first a long, tall plant with silk tassel-like hair, the second a broad-leafed plant low to the ground, and the third a medium-height plant with gentle vines. The plants, of course, were corn, squash, and beans, the Three Sisters.

From Project I'M READY, Northeastern State University

The Three Sisters Legend #3

A woman of medicine who could no longer bear the fighting among her three daughters asked the Creator to help her find a way to get them to stop. That night she had a dream, and in it each sister was a different seed. In her dream, she planted them in one mound in just the way they would have lived at home and told them that in order to grow and thrive, they would need to be different but dependent upon each other. They needed to see that each was special and each had great things to offer on her own and with the others.

The next morning while cooking breakfast, she cooked each daughter an egg, but each was different: one hard-boiled, one scrambled, and one over-easy. She told her daughters of her dream and said to them, "You are like these eggs. Each is still an egg but with different textures and flavors. Each of you has a special place in the world and in my heart." The daughters started to cry and hugged each other, because now they would celebrate their differences and love one another more because of them. From that day on, Native people have planted the three crops together—Three Sisters helping and loving each other.

From <http://www.ncdcr.gov/Portals/7/Collateral/Database/F05.legend.three.sisters.pdf>
Legends and Myths: The "Three Sisters" as told by Shelia Wilson from Tar Heel Junior Historian 45:1 (fall 2005)

The Three Sisters Legend #4

The term Three Sisters emerged from the Iroquois creation myth. It was said that the Earth began when Sky Woman, who lived in the upper world, peered through a hole in the sky and fell through to an endless sea.

The animals saw her coming, so they took the soil from the bottom of the sea and spread it onto the back of a giant turtle to provide a safe place for her to land. This Turtle Island is now what we call North America.

Sky Woman had become pregnant before she fell. When she landed, she gave birth to a daughter. When the daughter grew into a young woman, she also became pregnant (by the West Wind). She died while giving birth to twin boys.

Sky Woman buried her daughter in the new earth of Turtle Island. From her grave grew three sacred plants—corn, beans, and squash. These plants provided food for her grandsons, and later, for all of humanity. These special gifts ensured the survival of the Iroquois people.

From Project I'M READY, Northeastern State University

The Pilgrims and the Three Sisters

The Pilgrims who arrived in Plymouth, Massachusetts in the winter 1620 were not experienced farmers and were not familiar with the harsh climate and poor, rocky soil of New England. The seeds they had brought with them – peas, parsnips, and barley – did not grow. Yet by the next fall, the Pilgrims had enough vegetables to hold a three-day feast, which became the first Thanksgiving. And they had stored enough food to last another six months.



They did this with the help of one Native American named Tisquantum, who spoke English. The Pilgrims called him Squanto.

A well-known story tells how Squanto taught the Pilgrims to plant corn with dead fish buried beneath the seeds to serve as fertilizer. This is not the whole story. Squanto actually taught the Pilgrims how to plant corn, beans, and squash together, in a Three Sisters garden, the way the Native Americans planted them.

The Three Sisters vegetables grew together very well. The corn stalk supported the bean vines, which climbed up them. The beans supplied the soil with nitrogen, helping the squash plants and especially the corn plants, which need a lot of nitrogen. The large leaves of the squash plants shaded the ground, preventing the moisture from evaporating and pushing out weeds.

Corn, beans, and squash are highly nutritious, which was important for the Pilgrims and the Native Americans. When eaten together, the Three Sisters are a complete and balanced meal, rich in carbohydrates, protein, vitamins, and minerals. Another benefit is all three vegetables can be stored for long periods of time.

How was the Native American Squanto able to speak English and talk to the Pilgrims? That story is not a happy one. About five years earlier, Squanto was kidnapped by one of the sea captains working for John Smith, the same man who had been rescued near the Jamestown Colony by Pocahontas. This captain, Thomas Hunt, tricked Squanto and some other men of his tribe, kidnapped them, and took them to Spain to sell as slaves. But Squanto was rescued by some friars of the Catholic Church. He was then taken to England, where he began to learn English.

An English trading company hired Squanto as an interpreter and sent him to America. When he eventually made his way back to his home, he found the his entire tribe had died from disease.

Squanto went to live with another local tribe called the Wampanoag, who lived near Plymouth, where the Pilgrims landed. Squanto served as an interpreter and peace maker between the Wampanoag tribe and the Pilgrims, and he helped the Pilgrims adapt to the new land.

Three Sisters Stew

Ingredients

1 tablespoon vegetable oil
2 cloves garlic, minced
1 medium onion, diced
1 medium green pepper, chopped roughly
2-3 cups pumpkin or winter squash cubes, fresh or frozen (1 fresh, use 1 butternut squash or 2 smaller squash)
1 can (14.5 to 16 ounces) diced tomatoes with juice (or about 1 quart fresh)
2 cups cooked black beans (if using canned, rinse and drain)
2 cups corn kernels, fresh or frozen (2-3 ears of fresh corn)
2 teaspoons ground cumin
1 teaspoon dried oregano
1 teaspoons salt
1 teaspoon pepper
2 cups vegetable stock (or chicken stock)

Optional ingredients

¼ cup chopped fresh cilantro
1 can (4 ounces) chopped mild green chiles
(or 1-2 finely chopped jalapeno peppers)



Instructions

Heat the oil in a large pot. Add garlic, onion, green pepper, and squash. Sauté a few minutes over medium heat. Stir in tomatoes, beans, corn, cumin, oregano, salt, pepper, and chiles (if using.) Cook until hot.

Add stock and bring to a boil. Reduce to a simmer. Cover and simmer 30 minutes.

Taste and adjust seasoning as desired (you can also add extra broth if it is very thick).

Optional: Add a spoonful of cilantro to individual bowls just before serving.

Adapted from: art of natural living <http://artofnaturalliving.com/>