



Three Sisters Garden Resource Page

(Onkwawen Tkaientohseron "Our Garden" The Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres)

Corn provides a natural pole for bean vines to climb. Beans fix nitrogen on their roots, improving the overall fertility of the plot by providing nitrogen to the following years' corn. Bean vines also help stabilize the corn plants, making them less vulnerable to blowing over in the wind. Shallow-rooted squash vines become a living mulch, shading emerging weeds and preventing soil moisture from evaporating, thereby improving the overall crops' chances of survival in dry years. Spiny squash plants also help discourage predators from approaching the corn and beans. The large amount of crop residue from this planting combination can be incorporated back into the mound at the end of the season, to build up the organic matter in the soil and improve its structure.

Corn, beans and squash also complement each other nutritionally. Corn provides carbohydrates, the dried beans are rich in protein, balancing the lack of necessary amino acids found in corn. Finally, squash yields both vitamins from the fruit and healthful, delicious oil from the seeds.

Planting a Three Sisters Garden in a 10' x 10' Square

Success with a Three Sisters garden involves careful attention to timing, seed spacing, and varieties. In many areas, if you simply plant all three in the same hole at the same time, the result will be a snarl of vines in which the corn gets overwhelmed.

When and Where to Plant:

Plant your Three Sisters garden in late spring once the danger of frost has passed. Choose a site that has direct sunshine for most of the day and has access to a water source. Once a site had been found, the next step is to determine your site's dimensions. Draw up a garden layout to help gardeners know where and what to plant.

What to plant:

Corn must be planted in several rows rather than one long row to ensure adequate pollination. Choose pole beans or runner beans and a squash or pumpkin variety with trailing vines, rather than a compact bush.

Note: a 10x10 foot square of space for your Three Sisters garden is the minimum area needed to ensure good corn pollination. If you have a small garden, you can plant fewer mounds, but be aware that you may not get good full corn ears as a result.



Mound Planting:

1. Choose your mound planting site in full sun (minimum 6-8 hours/day of direct sunlight throughout the growing season). Amend the soil with plenty of compost or aged manure, since corn is a heavy feeder and the nitrogen from your beans will not be available to the corn during the first year. With string, mark off three ten-foot rows, five feet apart.
2. In each row, make your corn/bean mounds. The centre of each mound should be 5 feet apart from the center of the next. Each mound should be around 12" high and about 18" across with flattened tops. If you're in a dry area, flatten the top and make a shallow depression to keep water from running off. The mounds should be staggered in adjacent rows.
3. Plant 4 corn seeds after soaking them in water overnight in each mound, in a 6" square. It is customary to give thanks to the four directions by orientating the corn seeds to the North, South, East and West. Young gardeners can learn to use a compass and observe the sun's movements.
4. After a week or two, when the corn is at least 4" tall, its time to plant the beans and squash. First, weed the entire patch. Soak and plant 4 bean seeds in each corn mound. They should be 3" apart from the corn plants, completing the square.
5. Build your squash mounds in each row between each corn/bean mound. Make them the same size as the corn/bean mounds. Plant 3 squash seeds, 4" apart in a triangle in the middle of each mound.
6. When the squash seedlings emerge, thin them to 2 plants per mound. You may have to weed the area several times until the squash take over and shade new weeds.