

What is a Three Sisters garden?

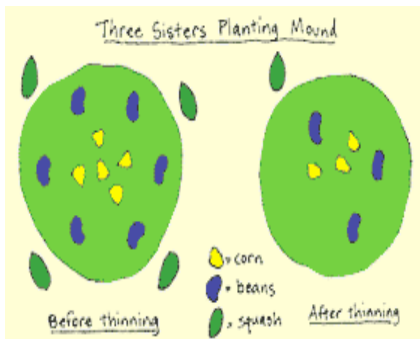
Six Nations peoples (Haudenosaunee, pronounced hah-dee-no-show-nee, and meaning "People of the longhouse") have used a wide range of agricultural techniques. Perhaps the best known is a garden planted with corn, beans, and squash together—a trio of companion plants referred to as the "three sisters."

In a Three Sisters garden, **beans, corn, and squash** help each other grow.

1. Beans have tiny **bacteria** living on their roots that help absorb **nitrogen** from the air and soil. Nitrogen helps corn grow strong and tall.
2. Corn provides **support** for beans by acting like a beanpole.
3. The large, prickly squash leaves **shade the soil**, preventing weed growth, and deter animal pests.



These gardens—considered special gifts from the creator—played an important role in the **agriculture** and **nutrition** of many Six Nations peoples and other farming nations throughout North America. Considered a **survival garden**, families could survive the long winter from the fruits of the Three Sisters!



How do I plant a Three Sisters garden?

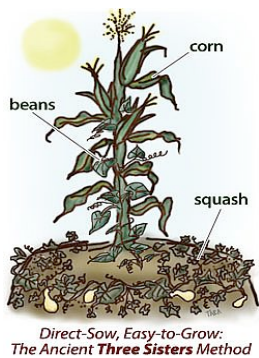
Plan and select a site. You'll want to plant your Three Sisters garden in late spring once the danger of frost has passed. Choose a site that has **direct sunshine** for most of the day and access to water.

Prepare the soil. First, break up and rake the soil. Next, build a **mound** about **30 cm high** and **1 meter in diameter**. Mounds should be **1 to 1.5 meters apart** in all directions.

Plant corn. Soak four to seven corn seeds overnight and then plant them about **15 cm apart** in the center of each mound. Many Six Nations people honor the **tradition** of giving thanks to the "Four Directions" by orienting the corn seeds to the north, south, east, and west.

Plant beans and squash. After a week or two, when the corn is at least **10 cm high**, soak and then plant six pole bean seeds in a circle about **15 cm** away from the corn. At about the same time, plant four squash or pumpkin seeds next to the mound, about a foot away from the beans.

Maintain your traditional garden. As corn plants grow, weed gently around them and mound soil around the base of each stem for support. When the corn is knee-high and again when **silks** appear on the husks, **side-dress** by putting a **high nitrogen fertilizer** (such as aged manure or fish emulsion) on the soil surface near each plant. If beans aren't winding their way around the corn, you can help by moving **tendrils** to the stalks. If you pinch off the tips of squash runners after several fruits have started to form, the plants will devote more **energy** to producing squash.



What seeds are the best to plant?

Here are some different varieties you can try. Many seed packets have a picture of the vegetable on the front, to help you decide.

Corn

TEXAS HONEY JUNE
BLACK IROQUOIS
BLACK AZTEC

Beans

SCARLET RUNNER
TRUE CRANBERRY
HOPI PURPLE SNAP BEAN

Squash

ZUCCHINI
ACORN SQUASH
LONG PIE PUMPKIN

How do I save the seeds for next season?

By **saving** and **replanting** some of the seeds from their Three Sisters gardens, Six Nations cultures brought the **cycle of life** full circle. You can save the seeds for next year, or give some to other gardeners. Make sure you store the seeds in an airtight container somewhere cool and dry! Here's how to do it:

Corn	Beans	Squash
Leave several ears on the stalk until husks dry and turn brown. Remove and peel back the husks and hang them to dry, out of direct sun, for a month. Once they're dry, remove the individual kernels.	Leave several pods on a plant until they turn brown and brittle. Break open the pods and remove the seeds. Leave them on a flat surface or screen, out of direct sun, to air dry for a few days.	Scoop out the seeds with a spoon and rinse them with water in a colander. Follow the same instructions as listed for drying and storing beans.

Three Sisters Soup

5 cups water	2 cups corn kernels
2 cups green beans, chopped in 1-inch length	2 cups diced, peeled butternut squash
1-1/2 cups diced, peeled potatoes	2 cups diced boneless pork (optional)
2 tbsp butter, at room temperature	2 tbsp all-purpose flour
3/4 tsp salt	1/2 tsp pepper

In large pot, **combine** water, corn, beans, squash, potatoes and pork (if using). **Bring to boil** over high heat. **Reduce heat** to medium-low; cover. **Simmer** 10 minutes or until vegetables are almost **tender**. In small bowl, **mash** together flour and butter. **Stir** into soup. Increase heat to medium. **Cook**, stirring, 5 minutes or until vegetables are tender. Stir in salt and pepper. Makes about **6 servings**. (From the *Toronto Star*, Nov 30, 2005, C03.)

References and Resources

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