

The Story of the Three Sisters: Corn, Beans and Squash

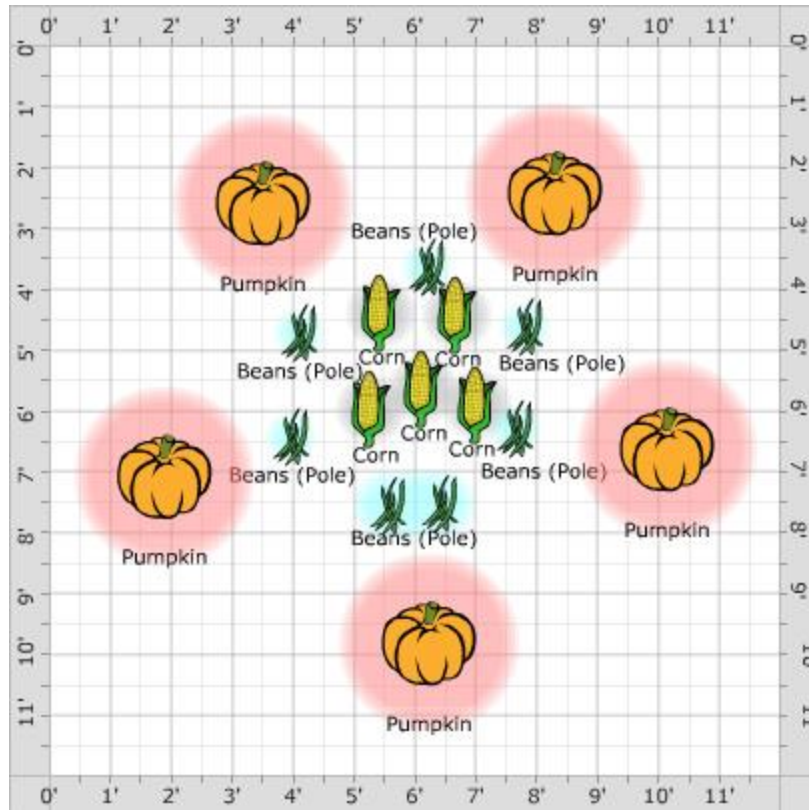
According to Iroquois legend, corn, beans, and squash are three inseparable sisters who only grow and thrive together. This tradition of interplanting corn, beans and squash in the same mounds, widespread among Native American farming societies, is a sophisticated, sustainable system that provided long-term soil fertility and a healthy diet to generations. Growing a Three Sisters garden is a wonderful way to feel more connected to the history of this land, regardless of our ancestry.

Three Sisters Garden Planning

The height of the corn supports the bean vines, which tie the corn stalks together for added stability. Beans fix nitrogen, which means they take it from the air and transfer it to the soil, making it an available nutrient. The beans feed the corn and squash, which are heavy nitrogen users. The large leaves of the squash plants act as a groundcover to provide shade, conserve moisture, and suppress weeds. Their prickly stems also deter predators.

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.

Companion Planting: Three Sisters Garden Plans



Planting:

1. Plant corn in late May. It is best if the ground has warmed and is no longer cold and wet. Tradition holds that planting begins when the leaves of a dogwood are the size of a squirrel's ear.

Soak corn seeds for several hours, but not more than eight hours, before planting. (Soaked seed may dry out quickly, so keep the seeds well watered for the first week or two if the soil is not kept moist by rain showers.)

Corn must be planted in several rows rather than one long row to ensure adequate pollination. Prepare low hills that are 3 to 4 feet apart within and between the rows. Place five to seven corn seeds, evenly spaced to a depth of 1 to 1 1/2 inches. Cover with soil.

There are many corn varieties to choose from. Dent, flint, and flour corns are especially suited to this system, while popcorn often does not get tall enough and may be overwhelmed by the beans and pumpkins.

Maintaining:

2. After young corn plants come up, begin removing weeds. As you are weeding, gently mound, or hill, the soil around the young plants.
3. When the corn plants are about 6 inches high, pole beans and pumpkins can be planted around the corn plants. Genuine Cornfield or Scarlet Runner bean and Connecticut Field or Small Sugar pumpkins are heirloom, non-hybrid varieties that are readily available, yet “authentic” crops for your project.

After thoroughly weeding, plant four or five bean seeds in each hill. Plant four or five pumpkin seeds in every seventh hill, placing them around the young corn plants. (Planting pumpkins in every hill would quickly overwhelm your site with viney growth)

4. Your plants will need water each week. If it does not rain at least an inch per week, the planting will need to be irrigated. If you are using presoaked seed, remember to water more frequently at first.
5. Most of the nitrogen converted by the beans will not be available to the corn and pumpkins the first year; the bean roots have to break down to release nitrogen. Corn is a heavy nitrogen feeder, so sidedressing with fertilizer is necessary to achieve satisfactory yields. You can use manure, compost, or commercial fertilizer.