



HOW TO GROW A THREE SISTERS *Garden*

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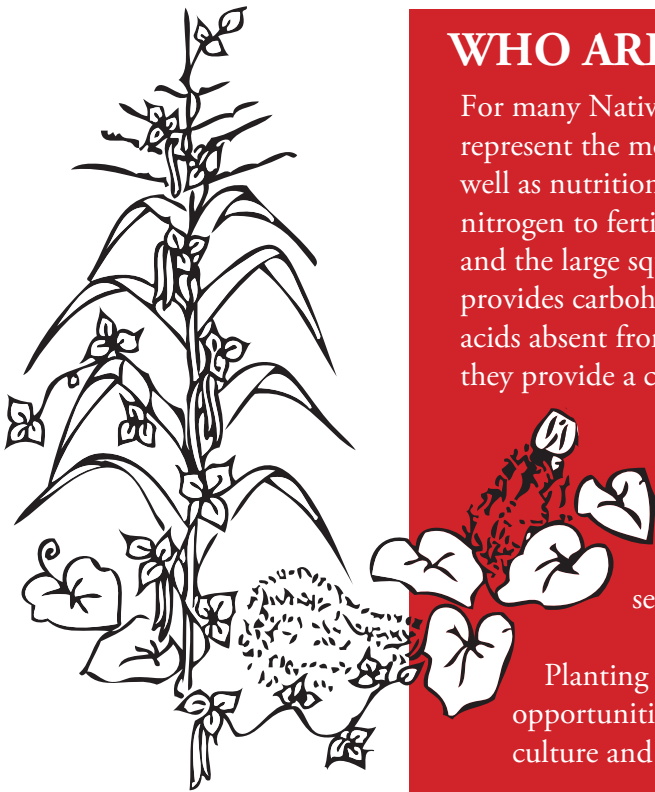
The mission of Native Seeds/SEARCH (Southwestern Endangered Aridland Resources Clearing House) is to conserve, distribute, and document the adapted and diverse varieties of agricultural seeds, their wild relatives and the role these seeds play in cultures of the American Southwest and Northwest Mexico.

WHO ARE THE THREE SISTERS?

For many Native American communities, three seeds - corn, beans, and squash - represent the most important crops. They complement each other in the garden as well as nutritionally. Corn provides tall stalks for the beans to climb, beans provide nitrogen to fertilize the soil while also stabilizing the tall corn during heavy winds, and the large squash leaves shade out weeds and help retain soil moisture. Corn provides carbohydrates and the dried beans are rich in protein and have amino acids absent from corn. Squash provides different vitamins and minerals. Together they provide a complete, balanced diet.

The tradition of calling these crops the "Three Sisters" originated with the Haudenosaunee, also known as the Iroquois, where these seeds were planted together in the same mound. In the Southwest there is a tradition of planting the sisters together as well as in separate fields with wide plant spacing to maximize limited water.

Planting these three crops together offers interdisciplinary learning opportunities about biodiversity, companion planting, and Native American culture and for gardeners of all ages and backgrounds.



WHEN TO PLANT

The crops grown in a Three Sisters Garden are warm season crops and do not tolerate frost. Plant seeds for the three sisters outside with the spring, summer, or monsoon planting periods. We recommend directly planting all of these types of seeds as they will fare better than transplants.

Sister Corn should be planted first so that it can grow tall above the other crops. Plant seeds for Sister Bean 2-3 weeks later, or at least when the corn is a few inches tall. Plant the squash seeds 1 week later after the beans have emerged.

WHAT VARIETIES TO PLANT

The corn should be a tall variety so the bean plants have plenty of room to climb and do not overcrowd the corn. The bean variety should not be a bush bean. Lima, runner, and common bean types do best. Teparies often receive too much water and humidity in this type of planting and do not grow well. Traditional squash varieties can grow vines up to 15 feet long and therefore need adequate space to sprawl. Consider growing more compact summer squash varieties if you do not have much space. Be sure to choose varieties that fit your elevation.

THE OTHER SISTERS

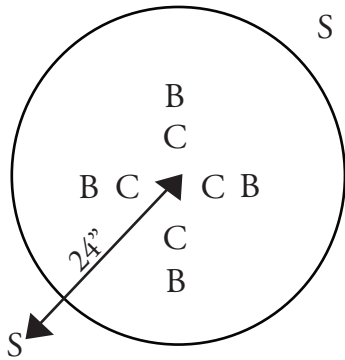
For some cultures, other crops are also important in traditional agriculture. For example, tobacco is equally sacred as the Three Sisters in much of the Southwest. Sunflowers and amaranth are considered other sisters. They offer shade to the other sisters during the heat of the afternoon, and attract pollinators. Amaranth's edible seeds and greens contribute to a nutritionally balanced diet, as well as provide additional stalks for beans to climb. Consider incorporating tobacco or circling your Three Sisters Garden with amaranth. **Please note: While sunflowers are traditionally seen as an "other sister", because of their allelopathic nature, it is not suggested planting older varieties of sunflowers in a Three Sisters Garden.**

Because they have a similar growing habitat, other cucurbits including watermelon, melons and gourds can be substituted for the squash.

SUGGESTED THREE SISTERS GARDEN LAYOUTS

There are numerous configurations to Three Sisters Gardens. Below are some examples but use your creativity and find what works with the space you have. The main consideration is to give the individual plants enough space to thrive. Layout Key: C= Corn Seed B=Bean Seed S=Squash Seed

THREE SISTER MOUNDS



This is the classic three sisters layout similar to Haudenosaunee gardens. Mound the soil approximately 4 inches high with a small well in the center. It should resemble a moon crater.

Plant 4 corn seeds in the center in the well, 6 inches apart and 1-3 inches deep. After corn is about 4 inches tall, plant 4 beans seeds halfway down the sides of the mound at least 3 inches from the corn plant, 1 inch deep. After the beans have emerged, plant 2 squash seeds 24 inches from the center of the mound on opposite sides. Train squash to vine outward from the mound and not crowd the corn and beans. Place additional mounds 3-4 feet apart from the center.

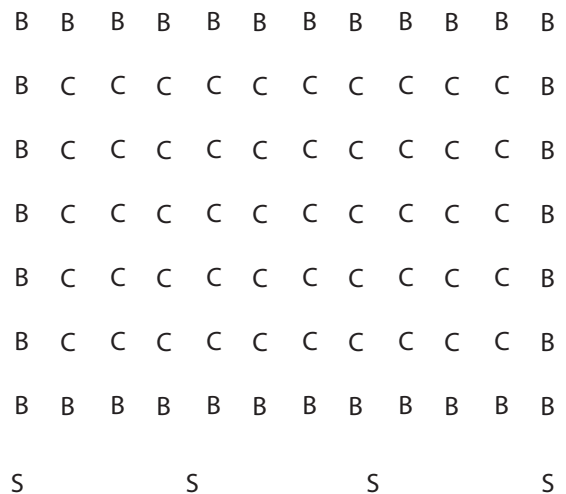
Within this layout it can be hard to harvest beans and corn at the center of the mounds, particularly if there are multiple rows of mounds. Therefore it is recommended to have a single or double row of mounds that can be approached from each side or create walking paths between mounds.

THREE SISTER FIELD

This layout is ideal for corn pollination because the corn is planted in a large block. This layout is similar to traditional Rarámuri fields.

Plant corn 1-3 inch deep, 6-12 inches apart. The size of the interior block of corn can vary but ideal is at least 5 plants on each side. The pole beans can be planted 1 inch deep and close enough to climb the corn, 3-12 inches away. Allow the corn to emerge and grow 4 inches high before planting the beans.

Plant squash in a row set back 3 feet from a bean row. Plant 2-3 seeds per location 3 feet apart. Isolating the squash to one side of the field makes access to the beans and corn easier.



THREE SISTER LANDSCAPE

In this layout, plant separate areas or fields of corn, beans, and squash. Each year shift the crops to the area to the right. Corn is a heavy feeder, meaning it requires fertile soil. Follow the beans with corn as the beans will have added nutrients to the soil. Plant corn and bean seeds 6-12 inches apart in row that are 18 inches apart. Squash can be planted in rows 3 feet apart.

