

The Three Sisters Garden

By Joseph Parish



This past week I spent some time at the Sussex County Master Gardeners Demonstration Garden located behind the Carvel Center in Georgetown. Within the confines of this exceptionally serene and tranquil garden can be found what is known as a “Three Sisters Garden”.

What are the “Three Sisters” you may be wondering? The “Three Sisters Garden” is composed mainly of Corn, Beans, and Squash. The combination of these three vegetables result in what the Native Americans originally referred to as “The Three Sisters”. It was these vegetables arranged in a specific manner that amazed the Europe adventurers as they first set foot in the new world. The natives of America discovered long ago that these three selected plants seemed to thrive exceptionally well when inter-planted together.

When the European travelers arrived from far away in the 1600s, they quickly discovered that the Iroquois had been raising their vegetables in this manner for over 300 years. This trio of plants physically and spiritually sustained the tribes in an unparalleled manner. These three plants were frequently viewed as a gift from God and were always grown and eaten together to provide the warriors and their families with a balanced diet.

There is a Native American fable concerning the three sisters and in the tale it explains some interesting scientific principles as well. The corn is thought of as the older sister and as such provides the beans with adequate support similar to how in the human aspect older sisters frequently will help support their younger siblings. The beans in turn pull life providing oxygen from the air and divert it to the soil often to the benefit of all three of the sisters.

In time the beans will grow among the scrambled squash vines as they ultimately wind and twist their way up the cornstalk seeking sunlight to hold its sisters together. The squash leaves provide protection for the plants by shading the soil and keeping it moist while at the same time thwart weed development. Additionally, these prickly offshoots from the squash plants tend to keep animals from invading the sister's turf since they do not like stepping on the leaves.

In the event you would enjoy replicating the "Three Sisters Garden" at your home, merely work some fish scraps or wood ash into your garden soil in the spring. This provides the necessary nutrients and fertilizer for the plants to grow healthy.

Next, build up a foot high by four feet wide mound of soil. Planting in mounds will prevent the water from collecting at the plant's roots and stem. Actually, the Iroquois Native Americans believed that the sister's trio would not survive if they were not planted upon a mound.

After all danger from frost has passed it is time to sow six corn kernels into the mound. Place these seeds one inch deep and between 5 to 8 feet from the center of one hill to the center of the next. You will want the squash to sprawl across the ground providing a cover on the surface and to act as a mulch to hold the moisture in and block weeds. If the mounds are too far apart you will find that the vines will not cover the complete area.

As the corn reaches 5 inches in height, plant four evenly spaced bean seeds around each of the stalks. Research seems to indicate that the beans that were employed by the Native Americans were known as a "Tepary Bean". This type of legume is small, heat tolerant and especially drought resistant. These native beans were first grown in the Southwest portion of the country during ancient times. The variety is a fast maturing bean and is found to tolerant the desert heat and alkaline soil. They are a high protein bean which is excellent for controlling cholesterol and for those with diabetes. In general, the white beans possess a slight kind of sweet flavor while the brown varieties tend to have an earthy taste. The nice part is that these "Tepary Beans" are able to be used in any dish that standard bean are used in. Alternately, a gardener designing a three-sister garden could employ a common pole bean as they climb well and will provide the traditional look of the three sisters garden.

An interesting note on the corn used for the three sister's garden. Although you can try planting sweet corn it is not the traditional corn to plant. The corn used by the Native Americans was meant to be dried and ground into cornmeal rather than eaten on

the cob. It was a form of flint style that was multi-colored and possessed a strong, tall stalk. As a last resort, use the sweet corn since it is popular and tasty especially if you lack a mill to grind the corn into flour.

Approximately one week later proceed to plant six evenly spaced squash seeds around the perimeter of the mound. The squash which many have found to work well is butternut squash primarily because it is not a favorite food for the squash vine borer pest and it is very versatile to cook with.

Keep in mind that you should consider the average last frost date in your specific area. Remember, corn does not germinate well if the soil temperature is less than 60 degrees although a few varieties have adapted well to cooler weather. Do your homework on these topics.

The "Three Sisters" represent an excellent sample of companion planting with its three highly compatible vegetables. We would however suggest that at the end of the season you remove all the garden debris to discourage the development of disease and prevent pests from overwintering.