

Cultural Significance:

The three sisters plot is also known as Kionhekwa in the Iroquois language. The Iroquois' creation myth recounts how the Three Sisters, an inseparable trio, grew on the grave of Mother Earth, who had died after giving birth to twins. These plants nourished the twins and enabled the Iroquois people to survive. The three sisters' spirits were named De-o-ha-ko - Our Sustainers; this is the origin of the name, "three sisters plot."

Corn is native to western Sierra Madre in Mexico. Known as maize in South America, corn has been a staple to many Latin American cultures throughout history. In Mayan culture, representations of their sun god were depicted to the god of maize, linked through the life cycle: birth, life, death, and rebirth. Huichol people in Mexico use blood from the sacred deer to feed maize. The deer is a spirit said to guide shamans. Hopi people in America still perform ritual dances to the corn spirits today.



Figure 2: Mayan depiction of Huichol Maize Mother and her Five Daughters

The Three Sisters Plot



What is the three sister plot?

During pre-Columbian times, Native Americans (mainly tribes from North America and Mexico) grew corn with beans and squash as companion plants. These three plants are known as the Three Sisters. Corn provides a natural pole for bean vines to climb. Beans fix nitrogen with their roots, which improves the overall fertility of the plot by providing nitrogen to the following year's corn. Beans also help to physically stabilize the corn plants and make them less vulnerable to be blown 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. Squash plants also help discourage predators from approaching the corn and beans with their spiny leaves. The large amount of crop residue from the three sisters plot can be incorporated back into the soil at the end of the season to build up the organic matter and improve its structure. Corn, beans, and squash also complement each other nutritionally.



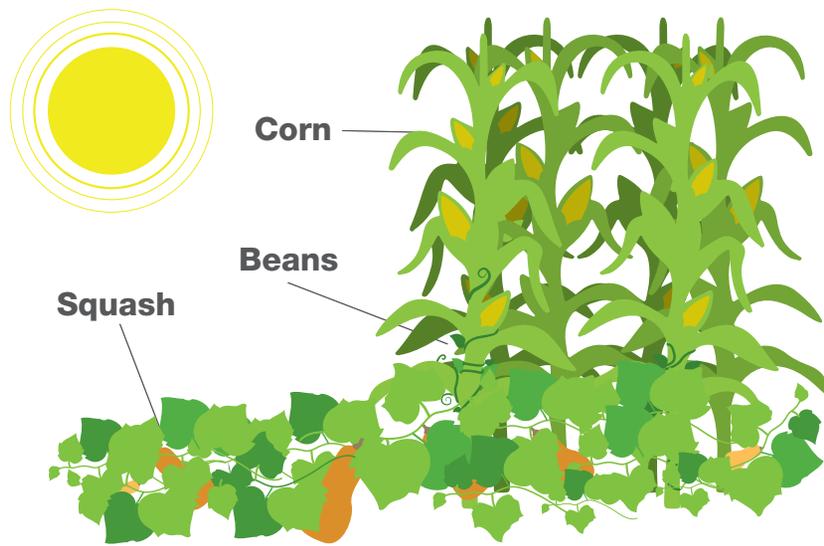


Figure 1: A few years ago, it became fashionable to plant the 'Three Sisters', a method of intercropping developed by the Mayan.

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.

Nutrition Benefit

Corn provides carbohydrates and dried beans are rich in protein, balancing the lack of necessary amino acids found in corn. Squash yields both carbohydrates and proteins from the fruit and oil from the seeds.

When to Plant

Sow seeds any time after spring night temperatures are in the 50 degree Fahrenheit range, up through June.

From the Community Voice

“Three sister’s plot... that might be a new concept for some people but for people who do farming or gardening is a favorite. The three sisters plot consists of corn, squash, and beans. The three are planted together to maximize their potential. This system goes back to the Mayans, but around the same time to the Native Americans. This was a method developed to increase the production of these three plants which were the main and most important components of the Mayan and Native American diet. The corn provides the space for the beans to grow; the beans become a fertilizer for the corn and the squash; and the squash provides a good water retention system. In my case, the three sisters plot is one of my favorite things in the garden and as an activist I can’t help but to make a connection between the three sisters plot and society. Let’s look at it this way; by themselves, these three plants will produce and will survive, but when they are together, their potential is expanded and the chances of them producing, as well as the quantity and quality, are increased. Now, in our society we have been taught that in order to be productive and successful, we have to live our lives though a model of individualism. We have this language and mindset of the individual. In reality, it is this individual mentality that in many occasions has crippled our nation, our businesses, our relations, our communities, and even our families. The truth is that we really need each other just like the corn, beans, and squash need each other.”

- Ian Torres, Heritage Garden Intern.