

## Three Sisters Planting Activity

### Wisconsin DPI Standards Alignment:

**Science F.4.4** – Using the science themes, develop explanations for the connections among living and non-living things in various environments.

**Social Studies B.4.10** – Explain the history, culture, tribal sovereignty, and current status of the American Indian tribes and bands in Wisconsin.

**Goal:** Students will understand the “three sisters” method of planting as a method of fostering a symbiotic relationship beneficial to the corn, bean, and squash plants.

**Objectives:**

- 1) Students will be able to name the three plants involved in the “three sisters” method of planting.
- 2) Students will be able to name the benefits of this practice to each plant involved.
- 3) Students will plant their own “three sisters” garden.

Native Americans were very skillful farmers. By the time Europeans had arrived on the North American continent, various Native tribes had domesticated and hybridized over 150 plants, including over 150 varieties and colors of six species of corn, five main species of beans, squash, gourds, pumpkins, tomatoes, peppers, peanuts, strawberries, blueberries, Jerusalem artichokes, potatoes (both white and sweet), chocolate, vanilla, sunflowers, and many others.

Corn, beans, and squash were staple crops for Indian tribes throughout Wisconsin. Wisconsin Indians boiled, roasted, steamed, and dried corn to be ground later and put into stews. Because corn could be dried, it provided a good source of food through the winter. Some Wisconsin tribes, particularly the Oneida and Ojibwe, grew their corn using the “Three Sisters” method.

Native peoples were very respectful of the earth when they planted their crops. They made sure not to overtax the soils in which they planted and were careful to fertilize the ground to keep it healthy. They also had an understanding of how different plants worked together and planted seeds together when it was mutually beneficial to do so. Many Native farmers still practice these responsible methods of working the land.

One example of this is the “three sisters” method of planting corn, squash, and beans. According to Linda Tilgner, author of *Let's Grow: 72 Gardening Adventures with Children*, “The companionship of interplanting helps these vegetable friends. Corn provides support for the pole beans and a windbreak and shade for the squash. Beans produce nitrogen for the corn. Squash keeps the corn roots cool and discourages marauding raccoons, who don't like to walk on their prickly leaves.”(p. 66) The Oneida creation story tells of how the Oneida people received the gifts of corn, squash, and beans, the “three sisters” from Skywoman, the great grandmother of the tribe.

Supplies:

Trowel  
Potting soil  
Cups  
Masking tape  
Permanent marker  
Bean, corn, and squash seeds  
Watering can

- 1) Give each student a plastic cup and one seed each of corn, bean, and squash.
- 2) Students will fill their cups  $\frac{3}{4}$  full with soil. Using their fingers, they will create three holes, one for each seed. Cover the seeds with another inch or so of soil.
- 3) Students will need to start their seeds' growth by giving them a drink. Corn is an especially thirsty plant. Continue to water regularly.
- 4) The seeds should sprout in 7 to 10 days. You may need to replant your "three sisters" as they will outgrow their little house quickly. Also, help the beans to find the corn stalks so that they can climb up them for stability.
- 5) Put a piece of masking tape on your cup and write your name on the tape in permanent marker. This will help you to easily identify your "three sisters" garden.