

The Three Sisters: Science/ Social Science

Grades 4-6

The Three Sisters is the native legend of how the crops corn, beans, and squash came to be grown together in so many different native cultures. This lesson plan and accompanying presentation has the following course objectives:

1. Understand and discuss the cultural significance of the three sisters in Native Cultures
2. Discuss the similarities between different versions of the Three Sister's legend
3. Discuss oral story telling over the written word
4. Understand and discuss why the three plants grow well together; to understand how plants grow.
5. Discuss healthy eating.

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"The Three Sisters" Background and Legends

The *Three Sisters* (corn, beans, and squash) have been planted by traditional Native American gardeners in many different regions of North America. Although many different Native American people have adopted this traditional gardening technique, it originated with the Haudenosaunee (hah-dee-no-show-nee), or "People of the Longhouse".

The traditional *Three Sisters* garden forms an ecosystem by creating a community of plants and animals. This system creates a beneficial relationship between the three plants- each plant helps the others grow. This is a form of *companion planting*.

Modern day agriculturists know it as the genius of the Indians, who interplanted pole beans and squash with corn, using the strength of the sturdy corn stalks to support the twining beans and the shade of the spreading squash vines to trap moisture for the growing crop. Research has further revealed the additional benefits of this "companion planting." The bacterial colonies on the bean roots capture nitrogen from the air, some of which is released into the soil to nourish the high nitrogen needs of the corn. To Native Americans, however, the meaning of the Three Sisters runs deep into the physical and spiritual well-being of their people. Known as the "sustainers of life," the Iroquois consider corn, beans and squash to be special gifts from the Creator. The well-being of each crop is believed to be protected by one of the Three Sister Spirits. Many an Indian legend has been woven around the "Three Sisters" - sisters who would never be apart from one another- sisters who should be planted together, eaten together and celebrated together.

There is an abundance of folklore, stories, and history surrounding Three Sisters gardening:

Legend 1:

The Three Sisters

There once was a family of a mother, father and three sisters. The parents worked hard at providing for the family, but constantly had to beg the daughters for help. They also had to continually stop them from arguing and fighting. The three sisters were different from each others and also unique in their own way. The eldest was tall and slender with long, silky, shiny hair, the youngest was small but muscular and attractive, and the middle sister was average in height and looks but was beautiful in her giving nature. For whatever reason, although they loved one another as sisters, they would disagree on any little thing and be distracted from doing any work because of these quarrels. The parents tried and tried to get the sisters to help in the garden and help with the chores. When working together they would always fight; when apart they would complain about the others. The work wasn't getting done and the parents were worried that if this kept up they wouldn't make it through another winter. It was planting time and the work had to be done, but as usual the sisters were too busy fighting. The parents needed help, and it was given to them, but not as they imagined. As the sisters argued in the field they were transformed into three plants. The first a long, tall plant with silk tassel-like hair, the second a broad-leafed plant low to the ground, and the third a medium-height plant with gentle vines. The plants, of course, were corn, squash, and beans, the three sisters.

Legend 2:

The Iroquois Legend of the Three Sisters

The term "Three Sisters" emerged from the Iroquois creation myth. It was said that the earth began when "Sky Woman" who lived in the upper world peered through a hole in the sky and fell through to an endless sea. The animals saw her coming, so they took the soil from the bottom of the sea and spread it onto the back of a giant turtle to provide a safe place for her to land. This "Turtle Island" is now what we call North America.

Sky woman had become pregnant before she fell. When she landed, she gave birth to a daughter. When the daughter grew into a young woman, she also became pregnant (by the West wind). She died while giving birth to twin boys. Sky Woman buried her daughter in the "new earth." From her grave grew three sacred plants—corn, beans, and squash. These plants provided food for her sons, and later, for all of humanity. These special gifts ensured the survival of the Iroquois people.

Legend 3:

The Three Sisters

A long time ago there were three sisters who lived together in a field. These sisters were quite different from one another in their size and way of dressing. The little sister was so young that she could only

crawl at first, and she was dressed in green. The second sister wore a bright yellow dress, and she had a way of running off by herself when the sun shone and the soft wind blew in her face. The third was the eldest sister, standing always very straight and tall above the other sisters and trying to protect them. She wore a pale green shawl, and she had long, yellow hair that tossed about her head in the breeze. There was one way the sisters were all alike, though. They loved each other dearly, and they always stayed together. This made them very strong.

One day a stranger came to the field of the Three Sisters - a Mohawk boy. He talked to the birds and other animals - this caught the attention of the three sisters. Late that summer, the youngest and smallest sister disappeared. Her sisters were sad. Again the Mohawk boy came to the field to gather reeds at the water's edge. The two sisters who were left watched his moccasin trail, and that night the second sister - the one in the yellow dress - disappeared as well.

Now the Elder Sister was the only one left.

She continued to stand tall in her field. When the Mohawk boy saw that she missed her sisters, he brought them all back together and they became stronger together, again.