



# *Three Sisters Garden*

*by Cathy Manus-Gray*

The Three Sisters Garden combines three plants, corn, beans, and squash, which support the growth of each other. Corn sustained native people for thousands of years and seeds were passed down through the generations and to neighboring tribes. It remains one of the most important food crops for humans today. Indian corn or popcorn which could be stored during the winter and then later popped or ground into mill was originally grown. In the garden, corn supports the bean vines. The original type of beans grown in this garden were dry beans that could be stored through the winter to use in soups and stews. Beans feed the corn plants in the Three Sisters garden by providing nitrogen to the soil. The third plant, squash with its thick leaves and long trailing vines acts as a weed barrier. Originally winter squash was grown to store over the cold months. Many varieties of each of those plants, both heirloom and hybrids, may be chosen for your garden. Excellent sources for heirloom seeds are Seeds of Change or Seed Savers Exchange which has many selections from Native American tribes.

The traditional design of a Three Sisters Garden is circular, but if space is limited try a container garden. As with any new garden, the first step is preparing the soil, adding plenty of compost or other organic matter to get your seeds off to a good start. The original method of planting is to start by creating three mounds each three feet in diameter. One holds four corn seeds, one holds two bean seeds, and the last has one pumpkin or squash seed. Allow three feet between each mound. If time and space allows think about adding a row of sunflowers or a garden bench to watch your garden grow.

If you do not have a garden area large enough, a barrel is an excellent container for a three sisters garden. The container should be placed where it will receive at least six hours of sun. Containers need drainage holes and small gravel may be placed in the bottom to help with water drainage. Fill the container with a soilless mix (usually peat moss and vermiculite or perlite). Slow release fertilizer should be added to continuously feed the garden through the growing season. Plant the corn seeds in the center of the container, the bean seeds around the edges and the squash seed at the very edge so it may trail out and over the container.

Follow the package directions for planting depths and germination times. Seeds must be kept moist. Vegetables are heavy feeders so be sure to use some type of fertilizer once the seedlings are established and throughout the growing season if slow release fertilizer was not used. Depending upon rainfall, your garden may need watering every day. A container garden will definitely need watering unless the summer season is especially wet. Have fun creating your garden. Use your imagination and add some marigolds or other annual flowers if you choose.

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