

# Three Sisters Lesson Plan

## SUMMARY

The Iroquois myth describes three sisters that were inseparable. These plants — squash, maize (corn) and beans — were staples of nearly every Native American tribe. The Iroquois believed corn, beans and squash were precious gifts from the Great Spirit, each watched over by one of three sisters spirits, called the De-o- ha-ko, or Our Sustainers". The planting season was marked by ceremonies to honor them, and a festival commemorated the first harvest of green corn on the cob. By retelling the stories and performing annual rituals, Native Americans passed down the knowledge of growing, using and preserving the Three Sisters through generations.

## FOCUS QUESTIONS

What three plants make up the Three Sisters? According to the legend, why do you think Native Americans planted these three vegetables together? Why do gardeners today plant these three vegetables together?

What does companion planting mean?

## OBJECTIVES

Students will learn the legend of the Three Sisters, understand why it is helpful to the gardener to plant corn, beans and squash together, and why they are considered companion plants.

In the fall: Students will harvest the dried corn and pound it into cornmeal with a mortar and pestle like the Native Americans did long ago.

In the spring: Students will plant the seeds of the Three Sister plants.

## MATERIALS

- Legend of the Three Sisters
- Squash and Corn Fun Facts
- Mortar and Pestle (in the fall)
- Cornbread to snack on (in the fall)
- Squash, beans and Corn seeds (in the spring)
- Two dead fish (in the spring)

## PROCEDURE:

### ENGAGE (10 minutes)

Gather the students in front of the Three Sisters Bed in the garden. Read the Legend of the Three Sisters and see if your students can guess which vegetable each sister represents Kids can munch on the cornbread as you read the story:

*The following story, entitled "The Three Sisters," was recorded by Lois Thomas of Cornwall Island, Canada. a collection of legends compiled by students at Centennial College, Toronto, Canada. Out of respect to native culture, we ask that you share the legend in a spirit of respect.*

Once upon a time very long ago, there were three sisters who lived together in a field. These sisters were quite different from one another in their size and also in their way of dressing. One of the three was a little sister, so young that she could only crawl at first, and she was dressed in green. The second of the three wore a frock of bright yellow, 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 guard them. She wore a pale green shawl, and she had long, yellow hair that tossed about her head in the breezes.

There was only one way in which the three sisters were alike. They loved one another very dearly, and they were never separated. They were sure that they would not be able to live apart.

After awhile a stranger came to the field of the three sisters, a little Indian boy. He was as straight as an arrow and as fearless as the eagle that circled the sky above his head. He knew the way of talking to the birds and the small brothers of the earth, the shrew, the chipmunk, and the young foxes. And the three sisters, the one who was just able to crawl, the one in the yellow frock, and the one with the flowing hair, were very much interested in the little Indian boy. They watched him fit his arrow in his bow, saw him carve a bowl with his stone knife, and wondered where he went at night.

Late in the summer of the first coming of the Indian boy to their field, one of the three sisters disappeared. This was the youngest sister in green, the sister who could only creep. She was scarcely able to stand alone in the field unless she had a stick to which she clung. Her sisters mourned for her until the fall, but she did not return.

Once more the Indian boy came to the field of the three sisters. He came to gather reeds at the edge of a stream nearby to make arrow shafts. The two sisters who were left watched him and gazed with wonder at the prints of his moccasins in the earth that marked his trail.

That night the second of the sisters left, the one who was dressed in yellow and who always wanted to run away. She left no mark of her going, but it may have been that she set her feet in the moccasin tracks of the little Indian boy. Now there was but one of the sisters left. Tall and straight she stood in the field not once bowing her head with sorrow, but it seemed to her that she could not live there alone. The days grew shorter and the nights were colder. Her green

shawl faded and grew thin and old. Her hair, once long and golden, was tangled by the wind. Day and night she sighed for her sisters to return to her, but they did not hear her. Her voice when she tried to call to them was low and plaintive like the wind.

But one day when it was the season of the harvest, the little Indian boy heard the crying of the third sister who had been left to mourn there in the field. He felt sorry for her, and he took her in his arms and carried her to the lodge of his father and mother. Oh what a surprise awaited here there! Her two lost sisters were there in the lodge of the little Indian boy, safe and very glad to see her. They had been curious about the Indian boy, and they had gone home with him to see how and where he lived. They had liked his warm cave so well that they had decided now that winter was coming on to stay with him. And they were doing all they could to be useful.

The little sister in green, now quite grown up, was helping to keep the dinner pot full. The sister in yellow sat on the shelf drying herself, for she planned to fill the dinner pot later. The third sister joined them, ready to grind meal for the Indian boy. And the three were never separated again.

#### **FALL ACTIVITY (20 minutes)**

Students will take turns picking the dried corn from the stalks and shuck the kernels from the cobs. Then each student will get a chance to pound the dried kernels into cornmeal.

While some students do that, others can collect dried bean pods to save for next spring's plantings. They can also look at the other beds that have native plants like tomatoes, potatoes, avocado, ornamental tobacco, etc..

The garden educator can point out the common plaintain weed - you can find this throughout garden along the walkway!

Common Plantain came to the United States with the Europeans. It is believed to be one of the first plants to reach North America after European colonization. Reportedly brought to the Americas by Puritan colonizers. The native Americans, observing its spread, named it "white man's footprint" or "Englishman's foot". Plantain is now naturalized throughout the United States.

Plantain has medicinal properties. The leaves as well as the juice have been widely used in poultices and lotions for treating sunburns, stings, insect bites, snakebites, poison ivy breakouts, rashes, burns, blisters, and cuts.

## **SPRING ACTIVITY (20 minutes)**

Planting the Three Sisters Bed:

Review the Legend of the Three Sisters. Talk about the science behind planting these three vegetables together. Review the term “companion planting.”

Follow the directions for planting the bed with two large mounds in the middle for the corn, surrounded by the beans. Then create smaller mounds on all the corners of the big mounds to plant the squash.

Before planting the corn and beans, dig a large whole in each mound and stick one dead fish in each hole, then bury them. This is a Native American tradition performed to fertilize the soil.