

Knowing the Three Sisters by Kimberly Burkard

While I find beauty in every season, there is something really special for me in Harvest time, the time of agricultural plenty, that occurs late summer and early fall. It's hard to describe what I like most about the season but if I had to try to put it into words, I would say it is the *abundant earthiness* of the season. All about us and on our dinner tables are the wondrous foods which are testament to the fertility and abundance of the rich, dark earth. There are many fresh foods I look forward in this season of plenty but there are few plants that supply us with more than the Three Sisters – Corn, Beans, and Squash.

The Three Sisters have traditionally been important staple foods for the Haudenosaunee and other Native American nations. They are easy crops to grow that produce quality food that can be eaten immediately as well as stored for winter. Modern nutritionists have found that corn and beans eaten in combination provide a complete protein source similar in quality to a cut of meat₁ - modern science merely confirms traditional knowledge that these are *good foods*.

Not only have these important food plants been passed down to us, but the traditional method of farming them as well. Rather than planting blocks of one type of plant as is the common modern farming technique, corn, beans, and squash were grown intermingled together. In this way the plants all benefit one another and increase their yields. Corn stands tall and provides structure for the beans to climb on. Squash smothers weeds and shades the soil keeping it cool and moist. Bean puts nitrogen, a necessary plant nutrient, into the soil thereby enriching the soil. If you are interested in trying Three Sisters Gardening for yourself, I would suggest looking for one of these two books – *Native American Gardening* by Michael Caduto and Joseph Bruchac and *Native American Gardening* by Gilbert Wilson. The first is a good book for gardeners, parents, and teachers alike. It has gardening plans, recipes, crafts, and stories. The second was written in the early 20th Century by an anthropologist working with Buffalobird-Woman, a Hidatsa woman and it is a classic text on Native American farming techniques.

The eldest of the three sisters, Corn, is so versatile and useful that it is one of the three most important cereal crops in the world and has more acreage dedicated to it in North America than any other crop₂. While most Americans only know corn as the “vegetable” sweet corn and the snack popcorn, corn comes in many different types with the most common types being: sweet, dent, flint, pop, and flour corn. Flint corn or “Indian corn” has colorful kernels with a hard outer shell. It can be ground for flour or meal, processed to make hominy, and can be used as an animal feed. (Popcorn is actually a type of flint corn.) Dent corn or “field corn” is used much the same as flint corn plus it is often processed and used to make all manner of goods from sweeteners to biodegradable “plastics.” Flour corn has a very soft starchy kernel. It is easily

ground and is used in baked goods. Flour and flint corn were the chief types of corn raised by Native Americans.

Squash, the middle sister, is a varied group as well. But unlike corn where all corn regardless of the type belongs to one species, squash can be of six different species. Each of these squash species has its own specific plant and fruit characteristics and there literally hundreds of varieties of squash in each of these species groupings. Regardless of the species, squash comes in a multitude of colors, sizes, shapes, and flavors. When it comes to food use, we tend to think of squash as being one of these types: winter squash, summer squash, and pumpkins. Winter squash are long-keeping squash with dry flesh. Summer squash have soft skin and fewer seeds. And pumpkins are the orange-skinned squash used for pies and Halloween decorations. All squash (and pumpkin is a squash!) can be eaten both young and mature.

Beans, the littlest sister, is no less interesting and varied than her elder siblings. While American consumers purchasing canned, frozen, and fresh green beans at their local supermarkets are all purchasing 1 of 2 nearly identical bean varieties, the members of the Seed Savers Exchange are maintaining more than 2200 varieties of snap and dry beans. Beans are definitely no less varied! The immature pods of most tender bean varieties are eaten as snap or green beans. When left to mature to their full size, the beans can be used fresh for shell beans or left to dry on the vine so they are used as dry beans. In the garden, most beans have one of two habits – pole (a climbing bean) and bush (a plant shaped as its name denotes). For the garden footprint they take up, pole beans are one of the most productive and efficient uses of vegetable garden space. And some, like the scarlet runner bean, have gorgeous colored blooms that are equally at home in the vegetable and flower gardens.

While there are many modern corn, beans, and squash varieties available to gardeners, there are also many heirloom Native varieties commercially available. These varieties often offer unique tastes and appearance along with very productive plants, multiple use harvests (fresh & dry), and/or good storage. What better seed to use in your Three Sisters Garden? Here are a few types that are thought to be Native varieties:

Corn – Mandan Bride, White Eagle (Cherokee), Hopi Blue Dent, Seneca Red Stalker, Longfellow Flint, Mandan Red Flour, Anasazi Flour, Oaxacan Green Dent, Black Aztec/Black Mexican Sweet, Hopi Pink Flour

Bean – Seneca Bean (Scarlet Runner), Baie Verte Indian, Nez Perce, Arikira Yellow, Hidatsa Red, Hidatsa Shield, Cherokee Trail of Tears, Aztec Half-Runner (Potato Bean), Hidatsa Shield Figure

Squash – White Scallop, Yellow Scallop, Batopilas, Boston Marrow, Connecticut Field Pumpkin, Green Striped Cushaw, Hopi Cushaw, Lakota Squash, Yellow Crookneck, Hopi Orange Winter

If you can't find these varieties at your local retailers, there are seed vendors that specialize in heirloom and traditional seed varieties. Most of them will send you a free print catalog if you request it. Here are a couple great heirloom seed sources to check:

| | |
|----------------------------|---|
| Baker Creek Heirloom Seeds | http://www.rareseeds.com |
| Seeds of Change | http://www.seedsofchange.com |
| Seed Savers Exchange | http://www.seedsavers.org |

Finally, how is the best way to know the Three Sisters? Yes, through cooking with them and eating them! Here are a few recipes to show the versatility and varied taste of these wonderful foods.

Indian Pudding (Corn)

- ¼ cup corn meal
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 cup cold water
- 2 cups scalded milk
- 1 well-beaten egg
- ¼ cup brown sugar
- ½ cup molasses
- 1 tablespoon butter
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ½ teaspoon ground ginger
- ¼ teaspoon nutmeg
- 1 cup cream
- ½ cup raisins (optional)

Preheat oven to 300°F. Combine & mix well cornmeal and salt. Add to cold water & stir thoroughly. Stir in milk. Boil mixture for 10 minutes, stirring constantly. Combine & mix well egg, brown sugar, molasses, butter & spices in a bowl. Stir this mixture into the boiling cornmeal. Add raisins, if desired. Pour mixture into a buttered casserole. Bake for 30 minutes. Stir in cream. Bake 2 hours more. Serve hot or cold, although excellent served hot with vanilla ice cream.

Zuñi Succotash (Corn & beans)

3 cups canned pinto beans, drained
1 ½ cups fresh or frozen (thawed) corn kernels
1 ½ cups fresh green beans, chopped
1 ½ cups water
4 tablespoons butter or shortening
1 teaspoon sugar
Pepper to taste
1 teaspoon salt
2 tablespoons shelled sunflower seeds, crushed

In a large heavy saucepan, place all ingredients except the sunflower seeds in water with 2 tablespoons of butter. Simmer 15 minutes or until vegetables are tender. Add sunflower seeds & remaining butter. Continue to simmer until mixture thickens.

Maple Baked Beans (Beans)

1 lb. navy beans
¼ lb salt pork
2 teaspoons dry mustard
2 teaspoons salt
½ cup maple syrup
1 tablespoon brown sugar

Place beans in a large pan or kettle and soak overnight. Drain off water. Cover with boiling water and cook 30 minutes. Cut salt pork into thin strips and add to boiling beans. When beans have boiled down, turn heat down. Mix in mustard, salt, and maple syrup. Cover pan and bake at 250°F oven for 5-6 hours. Add a cup of water if the beans seem dry. Remove lid during last hour of baking.

Simmered Winter Squash (Squash)

1 pound winter squash
1/3 cup sugar
2 tablespoons soy sauce

Dice squash into in ¾" cubes. Shave off sharp edges. Boil in small amount of water for 4-5 minutes. Add the sugar and continue cooking. When tender, drizzle with soy sauce. Have with stir-fried meat and white rice for an Asian-styled meal.

Fresh Zucchini Bread (Squash)

1 cup walnuts or pecans, chopped
1 ½ cups shredded zucchini (about 1 medium zucchini)
½ cup vegetable oil
1 cup sugar
2 large eggs, lightly beaten
2 teaspoons vanilla
½ teaspoon baking soda
½ teaspoon ground cinnamon
½ teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon baking powder
1 ½ cups all-purpose flour

Preheat oven to 350°. Combine oil, sugar, eggs, vanilla, baking soda, cinnamon, salt, baking powder. Beat until ingredients are blended. Add flour and mix until moistened. Stir in nuts and zucchini. Pour batter into a greased and floured loaf pan. Bake for about 65 to 75 minutes, or until loaf tests done.

Green Pozole (Corn)

1 carton (32 oz) Chicken Stock
1 jar (16 oz) Salsa Verde
1 can (15 oz) White Hominy, drained
1 medium onion, chopped
4 cloves garlic, minced
1 bunch cilantro, chopped
2 cups cooked chicken or cooked pork (great for leftovers)
salt & pepper to taste
1 lime, wedged
1 cup shredded raw green cabbage (optional)
½ cup cotija cheese (optional)
warm corn torillas (optional)

Add stock, salsa, onion, garlic, and hominy to large soup pot. Simmer on medium heat, about 20 min. Add meat. Return to simmer. Simmer about 5 min to heat through. Add salt & pepper to taste. Top bowls with some chopped cilantro. Serve with lime wedge. Optional - Can also top with shredded cabbage & cotija cheese plus serve with torillas.

¹ **Native American Gardening** by Michael Caduto & Joseph Bruchac, Fulcrum Publishing, 1996.

^{2, 3} **Seed to Seed** by Suzanne Ashworth, Seed Savers Exchange, Inc., 2002.