

The Three Sisters: Indigenous Ingenuity in Planting and Nutrition



Lesson Overview:

Through the story of the three sisters, students will explore three traditional vegetables and how the three not only helped each other grow, but also provided food year-round for the planters. The story highlights the interaction of plant-to-plant and plant-and-human relationships.

Learning Outcomes:

Students will:

- appreciate traditional storytelling as a way to pass down information
- have an understanding of companion planting and nutrition

Materials:

- A copy of the story
- Art supplies for the guided drawing (paper, pencils, pencil crayons, markers, modeling clay, etc.)

Instructions

1. Read story of the Three Sisters

There are different versions of the story. There are stories available online, and in the links provided. Your school library may also have a storybook about the three sisters as well. There are also a number of supplemental images you can display online while reading the story. Here is a version of the story that you can read to the class.

Sky Woman Falling

“ *It is 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. As she was falling, she grabbed onto the Sacred Tree of Life. Her hand grasped the end of a branch and slipped off, leaving a small handful of seeds which she clutched tightly in her hands. The animals saw her coming, and brought her safely to rest on the great turtle’s back. Of all the animals, it was the tiny muskrat who was able to dive deep enough to grab a small fistful of dirt from the bottom of the ocean. Turtle said to spread it on her back, which they did. Sky Woman spread her bundle of seeds over this new earth, which grew into lush green grass and tall sturdy trees, the beginnings of life.*

Sky woman had become pregnant before she fell. After 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. The term “Three Sisters” emerged from the Iroquois creation myth. ”

Another version of the legend is as follows:

“ *Very long ago, there were three sisters who lived in a field. The youngest was so small she could not yet walk; she crawled along the ground, dressed in green. When she wanted to stand up, she circled herself around her eldest sister. The middle sister wore a bright yellow dress and darted back and forth across the field. The eldest sister stood tall and straight, and her body bent with the wind. She had long yellow hair and wore a green shawl. The three sisters loved one another very much and could not imagine living without the others.*

One day a strange boy came to the field – in some legends he is a Mohawk, in others he is Iroquois or Cherokee. He was very handsome and knew the ways of the land. He could talk with the birds and the animals. He was straight and fearless. The three sisters were very interested in this boy as they watched him use his stone knife to carve a bowl or hunt with his bow and arrow.

Late in the summer of the boy's first visit to the field, the youngest of the three sisters disappeared. She was the one who could only creep along the ground; she could not even stand unless there was a stick she could cling to. But she was gone, and the other two sisters mourned her.

The boy returned to the field to gather reeds that grew at the edge of a small stream. He used the reeds to make arrow shafts. The two remaining sisters again watched him, fascinated. That night, the second sister disappeared, the one who always wandered hither and yon.

Now there was only one sister left, the tall and straight sister. She did not bow her head in sorrow, though she mourned deeply and thought she could not live in the field alone without her sisters. As the days grew shorter and colder, her green shawl began to lose its color and her yellow hair became dry and tangled. Night and day, she sighed for her sisters, but her voice was low like the wind, and no one heard her.

One day in the harvest season, the little boy heard the third sister crying, and he felt sorry for her. He took her in his arms and carried her to his home, and there a delightful surprise awaited her: Her sisters were there in the lodge, safe and very glad to be reunited. They explained that they had been curious about the little strange boy and had followed him home, and they had decided to stay because winter was coming, and his home was warm and comfortable.

The sisters also were making themselves useful to the boy and his family. The youngest, now all grown up, kept the dinner pot full, while the second sister, still in her yellow dress, dried herself on the shelf so she could fill the dinner pot later in the winter. The eldest sister was so pleased to be with her sisters again and so impressed with the help they gave the boy that she too joined them, ready to grind some meal for the bread or to be dried so the family would have food to use as the winter went on.

The little sister is the bean who needs the eldest sister to keep her from crawling along the ground. The second sister is the squash, who has bright yellow flowers and tends to run away across the field. The eldest sister is the corn. Her kernels

can be dried and ground up to make flour for bread. When the corn, beans and squash are eaten, they provide a very nutritious meal.

And from that day to this, the three sisters were never separated again.

(The three sisters disappeared in the order of their harvest.)

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***Author disclaimer*:** This story was told from oral sharings of the story and can be found in different formats online. The Skywoman Falling story is a story in itself as well, and traditionally shared, can take up to a week to tell. It goes into more detail about the fall and the roles of the animals. I shortened it here to fit in with the environment and mode in which I was sharing it. I do not claim any part of this story.

2. After you finish the story, discuss the benefits of the three sisters:

- Companion planting: how they each helped each other
- Companion nutrition – how they each provide nutritious quality, and together they provide all they needed
- How does telling stories help teach?

Companion Planting: The three sisters’ method of what is now referred to as sustainable companion planting provided soil fertility and a healthy diet from one single planting.

The corn provides structure for the beans. The beans pull nitrogen from the air and bring it to the soil, which the corn uses. As vines wind and twist towards the sunlight, they bind the three together and provide further structure. The large leaves of the sprawling squash provide shade keeping the soil cool, moist and weed-free. The prickly squash leaves also keep away critters.

Companion Nutrition: The three plants are a nutrition powerhouse when combined. Corn contains carbohydrate, providing a rich source of energy while beans provide protein to help build muscle and fibre to help balance the release of sugar into the bloodstream, keeping us fuller for longer. The squash is full of nutrients, such as vitamin A that helps to maintain good eye health. These three plants ensured healthy eating. It is believed these stories were told to the settlers who arrived, to help them survive.

Importance of storytelling: Storytelling is important and helps us connect to each other, to the Earth, to students. Teachings are as important as the food we make and consume. There are several stories waiting to be told, to be heard. Everyone loves to tell their story and to have it be heard. Stories are a way to remember teachings and pass them down.

3. Draw, paint, mold the three sisters with teacher modeling – guided drawing

At the front of the class, draw, paint or mold (from modeling clay) the three sisters with your students following you. Example steps: 1) the ground (garden), 2) the corn stalk, tall, thick and strong, 3) the corn with leaves at the top of the stalk, 4) a bean vine winding its way up and around the corn stalk, 5) beans on the vine, 6) the vines of the squash with large leaves crawling all along the ground, 7) a squash (pumpkin is most recognizable).

You can use the picture included below as a guide. There are also more examples online that can be used.

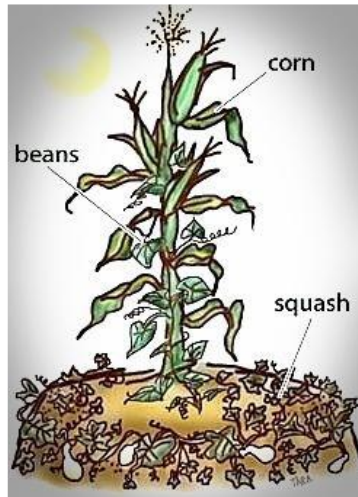


Image retrieved from: <https://www.almanac.com/content/three-sisters-corn-bean-and-squash>

4. Draw your favorite scene – draw the sisters

Have students draw their favorite scene from the story (maybe after a retelling – have the students help you in the retelling), or their depiction of what the three sisters look like.

5. Match up the three sisters to what they give/use?

E.g., beans take Nitrogen from air and put in soil; corn uses Nitrogen from the soil; squash provides shade, etc.

6. Storytelling/sharing

In a different class, have students think about a food they have a strong memory with. Have students share or write down that memory. It doesn't have to be a memory of the food, but that the food causes them to remember. Examples can be when a food made them sick, the best food they ever had, a meal with a friend, picking berries with family, etc. share one your memories associated with food. This exercise is good to show how stories are connected with food, and how food can help us remember things. An example is how the memory of picking blueberries turned into a story of family and love and the bond that is shared when on the land. Students may take a while to think about the story they want to tell, or complain about it, but then they slowly start telling their story. And if you listen, they tell you more. Students want to be heard. They want to know that they are valued and welcomed and want to be treated with respect.

Additional Resources:

- Three Sisters Companion Planting Illustration
<https://www.rickerstudio.com/three-sisters-companion-planting>
- The Three Sisters Vegetable Garden
<https://www.fortwhyte.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/FWA-NaturescapeForEducators-ThreeSisters.pdf>
- Celebrate the Three Sisters: Corn, Beans and Squash
<https://www.reneesgarden.com/blogs/gardening-resources/celebrate-the-three-sisters-corn-beans-and-squash>

Other Three Sister Stories:

- The Iroquois Legend of the Three Sisters
<http://www.wabano.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/CLANconnections-AUGUST-2014-final-2.pdf>
- Three Sisters – Corn, Beans and Squash
<http://indspire.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/The-Story-of-The-Three-Sisters.pdf>
- The Legend of the Three Sisters
<http://www.oneidaindiannation.com/the-legend-of-the-three-sisters/>
- Three Sisters Legends
https://naitc-api.usu.edu/media/uploads/2015/09/01/Three_Sisters_Legends.pdf