



Relational Gardening

- The Three Sisters -

Ahsen nikontate'ken:a



The Three Sisters (Ahsen nikontate'ken:a in Kanyen'kéha) are corn, beans, and squash. The Haudenosaunee have planted these three crops together for millennia. There are many stories that explain how the Haudenosaunee came to have corn, beans, and squash.

The Legend of the Three Sisters

This story comes from the Haudenosaunee *Legend of the Three Sisters*.

"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."



The following video can be used to introduce students to the Haudenosaunee creation story. This video illustrates how Sky Woman introduced corn, beans, and squash to the Haudenosaunee people.

<https://youtu.be/uzK7Z6IxHgo>

The Fourth Sister

In addition to the Three Sisters, Robin Wall Kimmerer, (a scientist, writer, and member of the Potawatomi Nation), says the fourth sister in the symbiosis is the planter.

"We too are part of the reciprocity. They can't meet their responsibilities unless we meet ours."

-Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013)



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The Three Sisters

Ahsen nikontate'ken:a (The Three Sisters) are the foundation of Haudenosaunee agriculture.

This information was shared by Kanyen'kehá:ka (Bear Clan) educator Yakothéhtón:ni Jennifer E. Brant from Kenhtéke Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory.



Each of the sisters play a distinctive role in helping to ensure the health of the garden. With this, the garden is an interconnected system where each sister lives in reciprocity with one another, both giving and receiving.



Corn- Ó:nenhste

Corn is the first sister to emerge from the ground and grows straight and strong. Its stiff stem must grow tall quickly to support the beans as they begin to grow around it. The corn also makes light available to the other plants.

"Without the corn's support, the beans would be an unruly tangle on the ground, vulnerable to bean-hungry predators" (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 132)



Bean- Oshahè:ta

Beans are the second sister to grow. They begin growing leaves low to the ground, but "around the time that the corn is knee high, the bean shoot changes its mind" (Kimmerer, 2013, pg. 130). The beans then extend into a long vine and start to wrap in an upward spiral around the corn (process of circumnutation). The beans give back to the sisters by creating a nitrogen fertilizer with the Rhizobium bacteria.



Squash- Onon'ónsera

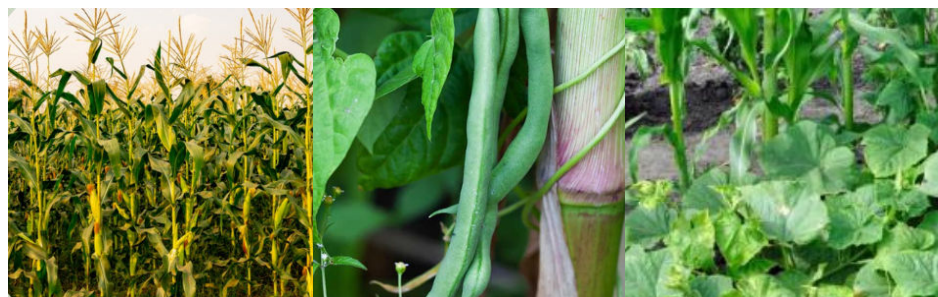
The squash is the last to grow and moves away from the corn and beans. This sister spreads along the earth, while growing prickly leaves, which protects the plants from being eaten by animals. Their leaves also shade the soil, which restricts the soil from drying and the impact of droughts..





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"The way of the Three Sisters reminds me of one of the basic teachings of our people. The most important thing each of us can know is our unique gift and how to use it in the world. Individuality is cherished and nurtured, because, in order for the whole to flourish, each of us has to be strong in who we are and carry our gifts with conviction, so they can be shared with others" (Kimmerer, 2013)



**A Responsibility to Be a Good Relative:
Living in Reciprocity with the Land**

The Fourth Sister

"We are the planters, the ones who clear the land, pull the weeds, and pick the bugs; we save the seeds over winter and plant them again next spring. We are midwives to their gifts. We cannot live without them, but it's also true that they cannot live without us. Corn, beans, and squash are fully domesticated; they rely on us to create the conditions under which they can grow. We too are part of the reciprocity. They can't meet their responsibilities unless we meet ours...The gifts of each are more fully expressed when they are nurtured together than alone." (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 140).

Citation:

**Kimmerer, R. W. (2013).
Braiding sweetgrass.
Milkweed Editions.**



"Acre for acre, a Three Sisters garden yields more food than if you grew each of the sisters alone" (Kimmerer, 2013)

