

"Three Sisters" Gardening

by Betty Olson-Jones

For the second year, Amador County Master Gardeners will have a "Three Sisters" plot in our Teaching Garden. Many have asked what a "Three Sisters" garden is, and I was just as curious last year when my son Kevin Jones planted our first one. After he passed away last July, I volunteered to keep this new "tradition" going and find out more about its history and significance.

The Three Sisters -- traditionally corn, beans, and squash -- were traditionally planted by the Iroquois Nation and other indigenous people in Northeast America and Canada. These three crops could be dried and provide food throughout the year, an important consideration. There are other traditional crops like sunflowers and amaranth that are also considered "Sisters." They provide shade to the other Sisters, attract pollinators, give additional space for beans to climb, and contribute nutritionally to a balanced diet.

In our teaching garden, we are planting the traditional corns, beans, and squash. These three crops complement and supplement each other: as the corn grows tall it acts as a support for the beans, which fix nitrogen in the soil and help support the corn in the wind. And the large leaves of squash shade the soil, protecting it from drying out, holding moisture so all three plants thrive. This tradition reflects the indigenous belief that all living things rely on each other for survival, and it allowed native people to produce enough food to support large villages of up to 1,000 people for 10-20 years. Nutritionally, corn, beans and squash also complement each other and help provide a complete diet. Corn provides carbohydrates, dried beans are rich in protein and amino acids that corn doesn't have, and squash contributes different vitamins and minerals than corn and beans.

There are many variations on layout for a Three Sisters garden. In Kevin's plot last year the corn grew taller than the shade cloth covering the garden, so we chose dwarf corn this time around. This year's plot is in a traditional style with three mounds, with a few kernels of Blue Jade corn in each (see photos). It's important to plant in order from corn to beans to squash so the plants mature together without growing at another Sister's expense. Now that the corn shoots are a few inches tall, it's time to plant pole beans around them. I'm trying "Purple Podded Pole Beans" this year. When they're ready to send out tendrils, the corn will be tall enough to support them. A few weeks later, I'll plant Lakota squash seeds around the base of the mounds. By then the corn and beans will have grown enough not to be overshadowed by the squash leaves. This variation works well for dry corn and dry beans since all the crops will be ready for harvest at the same time.

However, if you want to grow sweet corn and snap beans, you might try an alternative method so you don't have to step across your squash to harvest your fresh produce. One idea would be to plant rows of corn with beans planted in between, and a row of squash along one side. A useful side effect is that this helps with pollinating your corn. If you have a lot of room, you could plant the three in linear plots: squash, corn, beans. Rotate them each year so the corn and squash get the benefit of the beans' nitrogen-fixing in the soil.

I hope you're inspired to try a Three Sisters garden yourself!