



- [How to Recycle](#)
- [Where to Recycle](#)

Home & Garden

Reading time: 3 mins

Listen to this Article

Gardening With the Three Sisters



By [Gemma Alexander](#)

© JUL 27, 2023

Recycle laptops, phones and tablets for free and plant 20 trees

[START NOW](#)



If you've never grown a vegetable garden before, it can be a lot to take on all at once. Many beginners plant too much of too many things, only to become overwhelmed midseason and give up. But you don't have to go straight from houseplants to homesteading. Themed vegetable gardens are a great way to focus your efforts and improve your chances for early success. One of the easiest themed gardens is also deeply meaningful – The Three Sisters garden.

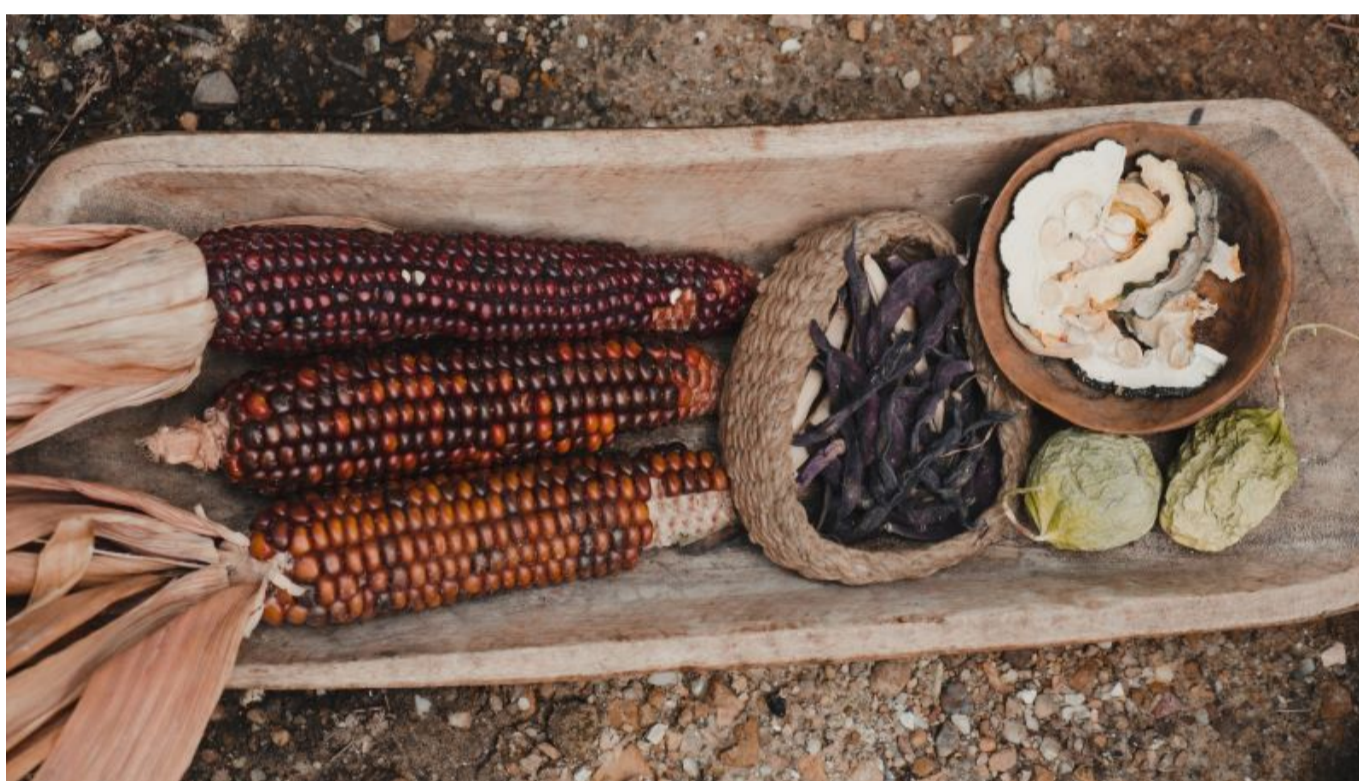
Sustainable Sisters

Few gardens could be simpler than the [Three Sisters](#) – corn, squash, and beans. And yet, planted together, the Three Sisters garden is a sophisticated [companion planting](#) system to grow maximum nutrition with minimum inputs in a limited

space. They minimize pests and weeds, attract pollinators and enhance each other. Interplanted, they yield [up to 20% more](#) produce while using a smaller plot of land that requires less water and less fertilizer.

In a Three Sisters garden, the strong corn stalks support vining beans, eliminating the need to build trellises or other structures – a bonus for beginners. Beans are legumes, [nitrogen-fixers](#) that will help fertilize the heavy-feeding squash. Sprawling squash plants cover the soil with their large leaves, acting as a living mulch that suppresses weeds and slows evaporation. The prickly leaves and stems of squash plants can also deter small animals from foraging in the garden (and discourage cats from using the soft garden soil as a litter box).

The Three Sisters are also called Sustainers of Life because eating corn, beans, and squash together – as in the traditional dish known as [succotash](#) – also [enhances the nutritional benefits](#) of each, providing a complete vegetarian protein. Traditional preparations of the corn – as in the hominy made by the Oneida or the Mexican nixtamal – further improves its nutritional value.



In a Three Sisters garden, all three vegetables will often ripen at once and can be enjoyed together when fresh. In addition, corn, beans, and squash can all be dried and stored for consumption in the winter months.

Cultural Agriculture

Three sisters gardening is as much a cultural practice as an agricultural one. Non-Indigenous gardeners who benefit from [native wisdom](#) have a responsibility to respectfully learn about that cultural history. Consider donating to improve [food security](#) for Native Americans as an element of [environmental justice](#). Nearly 20% of Native Americans are food insecure, partly resulting from a long history of harmful government policies.

It is believed that the Three Sisters were first planted together in Mesoamerica, where Guatemalan farmers still use a similar intercropping system called [milpa](#). The practice spread to the Iroquois (Haudenosaunee) of the Northeast [by the 1300s](#).

The stories and traditions relating to the Three Sisters are as localized as the seeds collected over generations. But the three crops are widely considered a divine blessing, and Three Sisters legends often focus on themes of mutual support. One of the best known is the [Haudenosaunee version](#) of the story, in which three sisters grow together until a boy begins to visit them. After each visit, one disappears, until at last, he brings the tallest, oldest sister to his home. There the sisters are reunited and make themselves useful throughout the winter.



You can find out who [originally inhabited](#) the land where you garden. The [Knowledge Center](#) on the First Nations Development Institute website and your local public library are good resources to learn about Native food traditions.



The strong corn stalks support vining beans, which will help fertilize the heavy-feeding squash. And the sprawling squash plants cover the soil with their large leaves, acting as a living mulch. Photo: [Myotus \(CC BY-SA 4.0\)](#) via Wikimedia Commons

Planting a Three Sisters Garden

Planting dates will vary depending on your local climate. But the sisters should be planted in [succession](#), and the order of planting is consistent. Beginning after your last frost date, plant seeds directly outside. Start with corn, which provides the structure for the garden. When the seedlings are a few inches tall, plant beans. Once the beans emerge, plant the squash. Squash must be planted last to avoid shading out the other two. Planted in this order, all three vegetables will often ripen at once and can be enjoyed together when fresh. However, corn, beans, and squash can all be [dried and stored](#).

Taller corn varieties work best, and white corn is often preferred. Beans should be a vining variety – lima, runner, or pole beans. [Pumpkin](#) is a traditional favorite squash but if space is limited, consider summer squashes instead.

The configuration of the plants will depend on your available space and climate. You can fit an entire Three Sisters garden in a [large container](#), although it's best to have at least 10–20 corn plants for reliable pollination. The Iroquois and Cherokee planted the Three Sisters in mounds that prevented waterlogging, while in the desert Southwest, Hopi and Navajo spread out the plants to capture more water from dry soils. [Native Seeds/SEARCH](#), a nonprofit seed conservation

organization in Arizona, provides a detailed handout on [how to plant](#) a Three Sisters garden. You can purchase traditional [heirloom](#) varieties of these and other vegetables from their website.

Feature image courtesy of [Chris Fazer \(CC By 2.0\)](#), via Flickr

advertising



Reading time: 3 mins

[Garden Guidance: Turn Your Yard Into a Pollinator Paradise](#)



By [Gemma Alexander](#)

Gemma Alexander has an M.S. in urban horticulture and a backyard filled with native plants. After working in a genetics laboratory and at a landfill, she now writes about the environment, the arts and family. See more of her writing [here](#).

Related Post

Home & Garden

Garden Guidance: Turn Your Yard Into a

Jul 27, 2023 Sarah

Lozanova

DIY Home & Garden

Infographic: 8 DIY Natural Repellents

Jul 27, 2023 Earth911

Home & Garden

How & Buy

5 Dog-Friendly Fertilizers for Your

Jul 26, 2023 Earth911

Earth911 is a universal resource that helps you find your own shade of green.

We educate and inform consumers, businesses and communities to inspire thought and facilitate earth-positive consumer decisions.

Small changes by thousands of individuals will have a lasting, positive impact. More ideas make less waste!



Join 155,000+ Earthlings

Type your email address

Green living news, DIY tips, and info about recycling just about anything.

SUBSCRIBE

ADVERTISE WITH US

Audience

Products

Partners

Rate Card

Contact Form