

Three Sisters

By Susan Camp

It's funny how a random statement can sometimes trigger a long-ago memory and lead to a cascade of related thoughts. On our recent trip to the Grand Canyon, a tour guide mentioned the Three Sisters, the Native American method of planting corn, beans, and squash or pumpkins together in mounds. I remember learning about the Three Sisters in elementary school. I can almost picture the illustration in our social studies book of a Native American man showing a Pilgrim how to plant vegetables properly in order to produce a bountiful harvest. I think my fourth or fifth grade class tried this technique in a garden plot at school, but I don't remember if anything sprouted. My memory of the Three Sisters gardening method is tied into learning about Squanto, the Patuxet man who showed the Pilgrims how to fertilize their crops with menhaden. Today we use fish emulsion as a natural fertilizer.

Since Thanksgiving is this week, it seemed a perfect time to explore the ancient Native American tradition of planting the Three Sisters. Tribes across the country have used this method for hundreds of years. Numerous versions of the Three Sisters legend exist, but all tell the story of three spirits sent by the Great Spirit to watch over and protect the most important crops: corn, beans, and squash. The Three Sisters are the sustainers of life. Annual rituals were performed to celebrate and pass down planting knowledge to succeeding generations.

Early Native Americans did not have the benefit of modern scientific knowledge, but they did understand that corn is a heavy feeder that depletes the soil and that bean plants somehow enrich the earth. Beans are legumes and fix nitrogen from the air into the soil, making it more fertile. The squash and pumpkin vines form green mulch that shades the soil, keeping it moist and preventing weed growth. Prickly squash leaves discourage rodents and raccoons from eating tender, young plants.

Numerous internet articles describe the Three Sisters planting method, varying slightly in the species and number of seeds of each vegetable to be planted. The Cornell University College of Agricultural & Life Sciences publication "How to Plant the Three Sisters" provides detailed information on preparing the garden by adding compost or manure; planting seeds at proper intervals to maximize growth; maintaining the garden by weeding and watering; pollinating the corn plants; and harvesting and storing the corn, beans, and squash. The article includes a garden design based on traditional Iroquois techniques. The Three Sisters method of planting is a great way to teach children about how different plants work together to affect the soil and each other.

The English colonists faced dire hardships in the early years of the settlement of North America. The first Thanksgiving feast was held at Plymouth Colony in 1621. Members of the Wampanoag nation joined the settlers for a three day celebration. The Smithsonian article "What Was on the Menu at the First Thanksgiving?" tells us that turkey, venison, ducks, geese, passenger pigeons,

and shellfish formed the basis of the meal. Beans, pumpkins, squash, and corn in the form of porridge likely were served as side dishes.

Over time, the foods prepared for Thanksgiving dinner have evolved into a standard menu. Mashed and sweet potatoes, dressing, gravy, and cranberry sauce are traditional fare. As our country grows ever more diverse, new foods will join the old standbys and younger generations will develop their own traditions, adding or subtracting dishes to suit their own families' tastes. Some dishes probably will remain, so, on Thursday, when you join family and friends at the table to enjoy your turkey with cornbread and oyster stuffing, green bean casserole, squash with onions, and pumpkin pie, remember the Three Sisters, the sustainers of life.

Next spring, plant a Three Sisters garden and in November you can give thanks for their gifts.
Happy Thanksgiving!

November 24, 2016