



the Three Sisters

The Three Sisters of First American agriculture includes corn, beans and squash. These three plants were used by First American tribes throughout North America. A system was developed that used the three plants, later called "companion planting." The three plants work together as they help each other maximize growing conditions.

Squash

or the Chickasaw word olbi.
Squash is the sister that grows over the ground. She serves as protection from weeds and offers shade to the soil, keeping it cool and moist.


Beans

or the Chickasaw word bala.
Beans are the third sister. She climbs the squash and then up the corn to bind all together as she reaches for the sun. Beans help keep the soil fertile by converting the sun's energy into nitrogen that helps the plants grow. As beans grow, they use the stored nitrogen as food.




Corn

or the Chickasaw word tanchi.
Corn is considered the oldest sister. She stands tall in the center. She also serves as support for climbing pole beans.



It is the symbolism of the Three Sisters however, that runs deep in the hearts of many First Americans, as we understand that we do not stand alone; we support each other, and we can only grow with the assistance of one another.

The lifestyle changes that have occurred over the past 200 years among First American people have contributed to the high incidence of disabling diseases, such as diabetes, high blood pressure and heart disease. One of the goals of the Impa Kilimpi (strong food) program is to help everyone in general regain or adopt a healthy diet and physical activity habits.



Impa Kilimpi' (Strong Food) is an initiative of the Chickasaw Nation. Learn more about Impa Kilimpi' programs and find great recipes at GetFreshCooking.com.



IMPA KILIMPI'

the Three Sisters:

Instructions for Planting a Three Sisters Garden

How to Plant:

Please refer to the diagrams and to individual seed packets for additional growing information.

1. Choose a site in full sun (minimum 6-8 hours/day of direct sunlight throughout the growing season). Amend the soil with plenty of compost or aged manure, since corn is a heavy feeder and the nitrogen from your beans will not be available to the corn during the first year. With string, mark off three 10-foot rows, 5 feet apart.
2. In each row, make your corn/bean mounds. The center of each mound should be 5 feet apart from the center of the next. Each mound should be 18 inches across with flattened tops.
3. Plant four corn seeds in each mound in a 6-inch square.
4. When the corn is 4 inches tall, it's time to plant the beans and squash. First, weed the entire patch. Then plant four bean seeds in each corn mound. They should be 3 inches apart from the corn plants.
5. Build your squash mounds in each row between each corn/bean mound. Make them the same size as the corn/bean mounds. Plant three squash seeds, 4 inches apart in a triangle in the middle of each mound.
6. When the squash seedlings emerge, thin them to two plants per mound. You may have to weed the area several times until the squash takes over and shades new weeds.

When to Plant:

Sow seeds any time after spring night temperatures are in the 50 degree range, through June.

What to Plant:

Corn must be planted in several rows rather than one long row to ensure adequate pollination. Choose pole beans or runner beans and a squash or pumpkin variety with trailing vines, rather than a compact bush.

Note: A 10 x 10 foot square of space for your Three Sisters garden is the minimum area needed to ensure good corn pollination. If you have a small garden, you can plant fewer mounds, but be aware that you may not get good full corn ears as a result.

Planting Diagram:

