

# The Three Sisters

## *A lesson from the New Jersey Agricultural Society Learning Through Gardening Program*

Objective: The student will be able to:

- explain how Native Americans who lived in New Jersey planted their three major food crops to reduce the amount of work they had to do to grow them.

Grades: 1-5

Materials:

large, 2-gallon plastic plant pots, one for each group (available for free from garden centers)

corn, pole green bean, and squash seeds (Be sure to buy pole green beans and not the 'bush' type. Pumpkin seeds can be used for squash.)

Preparation:

In small groups, have the students plant corn seeds only in the middle of 2-gallon plant pots one or two weeks prior to this lesson. Four or five corn seeds planted in the middle of the pot is enough. Corn seeds take longer to germinate than the green beans and squash seeds, so they should be given a head start.

Procedure:

Explain that the Native Americans who lived in New Jersey were called the Lenni Lenape. The Lenape had to get everything they used and ate from nature - they had to make clothes from animal hides, build houses from wood and bark, make tools from rocks and bones, and they had to hunt for or grow all their food. This means the Lenape had a lot of work to do



everyday. Even the littlest children had jobs of chasing the birds and animals out of the gardens.

The Lenape ate three major food crops - corn, beans, and squash. They called these crops the Three Sisters. They planted them in a way that would make tending the garden much easier.

First, they planted the corn. Do you know what corn looks like when it's growing? (Have the children stand up straight to look like a corn stalk.) Then they planted the beans in a circle around the corn so the beans will wind up the corn and they would not have to cut a piece of wood to make a stake for the beans. (Have the children act out the way the

beans would grow around the corn stalk.) The beans also help the corn because beans leave a nutrient called nitrogen in the soil, which the corn plants need. Last, the Lenape planted the squash around the beans to push out the weeds and to shade the ground to keep the moisture in for all three plants. (Have the children act out the way the squash spreads out all over the garden.) Planting different crops together this way is called companion planting.

Draw a picture on the board to show the corn stalk, the beans growing around the corn stalk, and the squash spreading out from the beans all over the garden.

Explain that today when we go outside we are going to plant the Three Sisters in pots so that we can see how the corn, beans, and squash grow together. Last week we planted the corn because the corn takes a little bit longer to grow. This week we are going to plant the beans and the squash.

In small groups (three to five), the students plant the Three Sisters in large 2-gallon plastic pots.

### Evaluation:

The student can name the Three Sisters crops and describe how they were planted by Native Americans to reduce work in the garden.