

# AMERICAN INDIAN HERITAGE MONTH



## **WALKING SOFTLY**

*The Story of the  
Three Sisters*

November  
2008



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# Walking Softly on Mother Earth

In the 21st century, America and the world at large is facing new challenges that will effect our ability to feed and house people, operate our factories and machines, power our vehicles, keep our food, air and water clean, and keep both humans and our natural environment healthy. These problems have recently become more pronounced and debated, and natural ways of solving these challenges, with new, clean and renewable solutions, are now being discussed in depth.

In the words and beliefs of the Mohegan people, “We are responsible to 13 generations in the past, and for 13 generations in the future.” We must meet the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Today, it is called “sustainability.” But it is not a new concept. American Indians have, for thousands of years, believed in taking only what is needed at the moment, and leaving the rest for future days, years or generations.

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But it is not a new concept.

Whether hunting for game or looking for plants for food or medicine, one took only what was truly needed to care for one’s family for the immediate future until crop cultivation came into existence. Each generation was taught to be caretakers of this land.

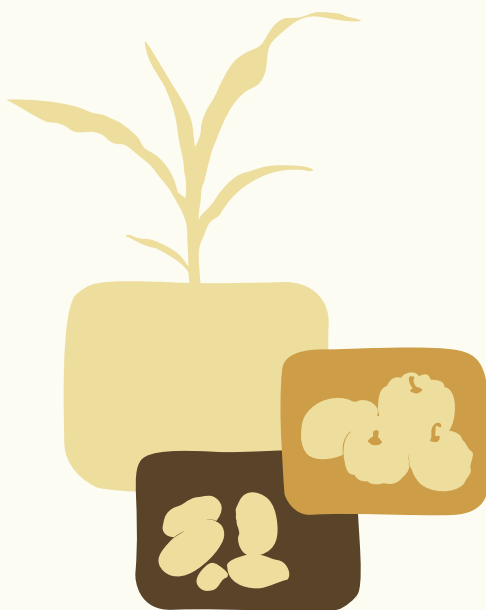
Mother Earth is a living thing that can feed us, house and clothe us, keep us warm or cool, and continue to nurture us, as long as we learn to “walk softly” upon her and treat her with respect. She has given us all that we need to survive.

Mankind must stop wasting the resources she provides, and start treating her as they would treat their own Mother.

Special thanks to  
Noni “Many Hawks” Nickerson  
*Mohegan*

# The Three Sisters

The Three Sisters Garden is a method of planting utilized by American Indian farming societies. The American Indian legends that tell the story of the three sisters vary from tribe to tribe, but some aspects are always the same. The three sisters represent corn, beans and squash, three crops that should be planted together, enjoyed together, and shared among the community. The story of these sisters, who are different yet dependent upon each other, is passed down from one generation to the next, as a way of ensuring that the Three Sisters Garden continues and these basic foods are always plentiful to sustain the community.

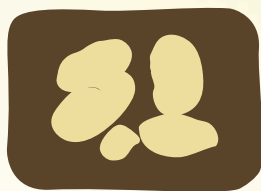


## Plant your own Three Sisters Garden:

Five or six kernels of corn are planted in the center of a mound of soil. When the corn has grown to about 6 inches tall, a circle of beans is planted around it, and an outer circle of squash is planted about 6–8 inches around the beans. The corn stalk serves as a pole for the beans, the beans help add the nitrogen to the soil that corn needs, and the spiny squash deters animals and provides a ground cover of shade that helps the soil retain moisture. The three crops complement each other both in the field and in their combined nutrition. This sustainable system renews soil fertility and supplies a long-lasting, nutritious food supply to the community.

# Beans

## The Sister of Community

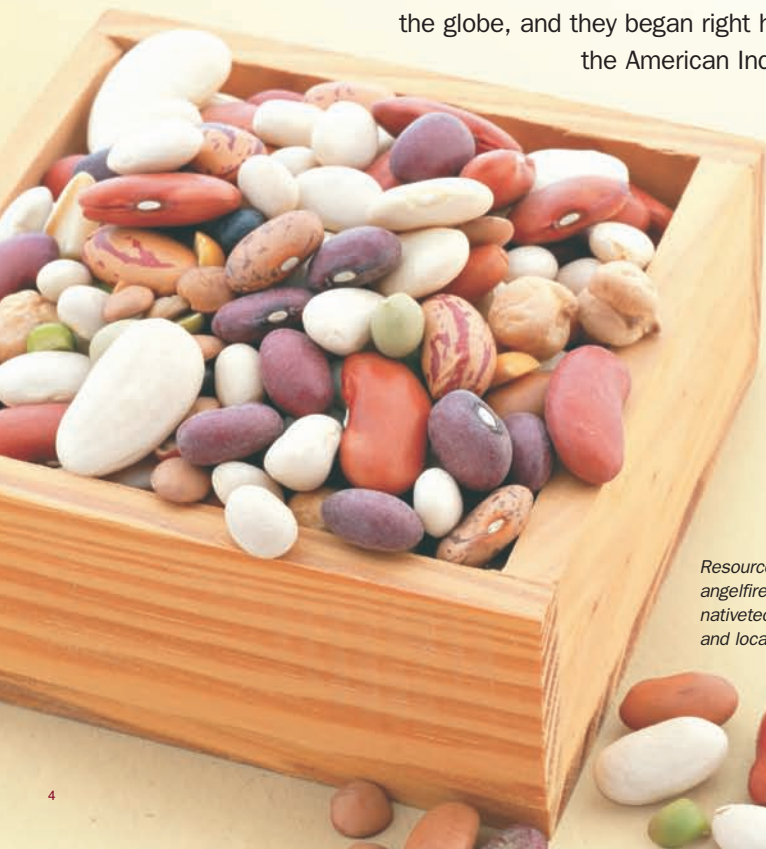


Beans of many types are one of the great plant varieties that have changed the level of nutrition around the globe. An integral part of the “Three Sisters,” along with corn and squash, the common bean is said to have originated in Central America long before Columbus discovered the new world. Varieties such as kidney beans, string beans, snap beans, butter beans, lima beans, pinto and pole beans are descendents of that original variety. These were widely traded and traveled ancient trade routes from South America north, and throughout the entire North American continent.

Planting in both hills and rows, American Indians grew large quantities in small plots and set aside large piles of dried beans to help sustain the community during the colder months of the year when food might be scarce. Like other hardy plant foods, beans were a staple in the Indian diet.

Beans have been shown to be an important source of protein, and have greatly improved the nutrition of populations around the world, especially where meat is not readily available or generally consumed.

Beans of all varieties are now a mainstay of people around the globe, and they began right here with the American Indians.



*Resources:  
angelfire.com,  
nativetech.org,  
and local growers*



# Corn

## The Sister of Support

Corn, or maize (*zea mays*), is a domesticated plant of the Americas, along with many other indigenous plants like beans, squash, melons and tobacco, and it provides the backbone of a Three Sisters Garden. European colonists in America quickly adopted maize agriculture from American Indians, and these crops quickly spread to other parts of the world. Over a period of thousands of years, American Indians purposefully transformed maize through special cultivation techniques. Maize was developed from a wild grass (Teosinte) originally growing in Central America (southern Mexico) 7,000 years ago. The ancestral kernels of Teosinte looked very different from today's corn. These kernels were small and were not fused together like the kernels on the husked ear of modern corn.



By systematically collecting and cultivating those plants best suited for human consumption, American Indians encouraged the formation of ears or cobs on early maize. Some of the corn was dried to preserve and keep for food throughout the winter months. Dried corn could be made into a food called hominy. Corn meal could be used to make cornbread, corn pudding, or corn syrup, or mixed with beans to make succotash. A special dessert was made by boiling corn meal and maple syrup. All parts of the corn plant were used. Nothing was thrown away. The husks were braided and woven to make masks, moccasins, sleeping mats, baskets and cornhusk dolls. Corncobs were used for fuel, and were tied onto a stick to make a rattle for ceremonies.

Native people truly were our first horticulturists, and bred and crossbred many types of corn, in many colors, for many different uses. From those corn varieties of long ago, we now count corn as one of the main crops across America, with thousands of food products being produced with corn as their main ingredient.



# Squash

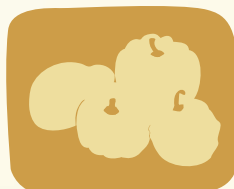
## The Protecting Sister

Native American people of Meso-America (Southern Mexico) grew several varieties of squash that eventually were brought to the North American Southwest, and traveled north and east via major ancient trade routes. Cultivated with other plants for better nitrogen supply, pest resistance, water retention and shade, squash was a staple of the American Indian diet.

The word “squash” comes from the Massachusetts Indian tribal word “askutasquash,” meaning “eaten raw or cooked.” There are soft skin types, such as summer squash and zucchini that must

be consumed soon after harvesting. There are also harder shell varieties that will keep over a winter, such as Acorn, Butternut, White Scalloped, Turk’s Turban and, of course, pumpkins of all varieties. Much like beans, squash can store for long periods of time, providing a valuable source of nutrition when other foods are in short supply.

Squash can be consumed alone as a vegetable, or used as an ingredient (and thickener) in soups and breads. Seeds were saved, dried and stored over the winter and planted the following spring with beans and corn, thus assuring the continuing supply of food for the Indian community.



# An Iroquois Story of the Three Sisters

A long time ago there were three sisters who lived together in a field.

These sisters were quite different from one another in their size and way of dressing. The little sister was so young that she could only crawl at first, and she was dressed in green. (beans)

The second sister wore a bright yellow dress, and she had a way of running off by herself when the sun shone and the soft wind blew in her face. (squash)

The third was the eldest sister, standing always very straight and tall above the other sisters and trying to protect them. She wore a pale green shawl, and she had long, yellow hair that tossed about her head in the breeze. (corn)

There was one way the sisters were all alike, though. They loved each other dearly, and they always stayed together. This made them very strong.

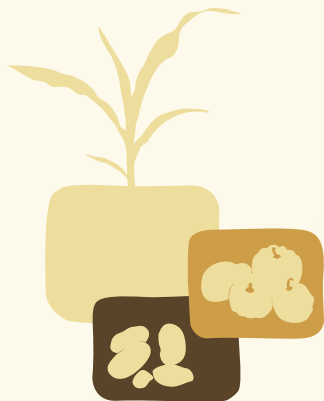
One day a stranger came to the field of the Three Sisters - a Mohawk boy. He talked to the birds and other animals - this caught the attention of the three sisters.

Late that summer, the youngest and smallest sister disappeared. Her sisters were sad.

Again the Mohawk boy came to the field to gather reeds at the water's edge. The two sisters who were left watched his moccasin trail, and that night the second sister - the one in the yellow dress - disappeared as well.

Now the Elder Sister was the only one left.

She continued to stand tall in her field. When the Mohawk boy saw that she missed her sisters, he brought them all back together and they became stronger together, again.





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