

Three Sisters Gardening

Overview: Introduce students to the Three sisters' story and work with them to create a Three Sisters Garden

Grades: K-2nd

Objective: Students will end the lesson with an understanding of the three sisters' story, the 3SI growing method, and how native peoples have and continue to grow the 3 sisters.

Time Frame: 1 –1.5 hour

Materials:

- Corn, Bean, and Squash Seeds for planting
- Ears of Corn, Squash, and Bean for a visual demonstration
- Food Products: Masa Harina, Ojibwe Flint Corn
- Three Sisters Story
- Shovel for building mounds (children can also use their hands to build the mounds)
- Labeling materials
- Optional: Color pages of the Three Sisters
- Optional: 3 sisters to take home with instructions for parents to build their own mound

Introduction:

- Introduce yourselves – make sure to repeat your name multiple times (ex. I'm Susana but you can call me Ms. Sue...sometimes I use a silly name to help them remember I'm Ms. Blue Sue)
- Explain who you are, what profession you have, why growing the 3 sister is important to you
- Go around and ask the children to share their names and what comes to mind when they think of gardening
- Make sure to thank each one for their thoughts and to praise them excessively. Be prepared for silly answers and for lots of giggles. Remind the students that it's okay not to have an answer. Usually someone will raise their hand and then answer with "I forgot or I don't know or silence", say thank you and move to the next student. You can say something like "that's totally normal, I do that all the time".

Three Sisters Story:

- Feel free to get dramatic with the story and to ask questions throughout
- Add context, who does this story come from? Where are they located on the map? Why is it important that we remember who this story comes from?
- You can use the visual as you tell the story or pass the visuals around
- Ask if they have siblings, are they older or younger? Ask what their siblings are like?
- Ask if they are an elder, mid, or younger child? Do they relate to one of the three sisters?
- I love to ask people to raise their hands, it contains the chaos that can ensue... I might say "Raise your hand if you are the youngest sibling" or "show me with your fingers how many siblings you have"
- Be prepared for funny stories about their families. Kids tend to share things that adults might filter. Regardless of what is said, be sure to actively listen, nod, and thank the child for their contribution.

- Story time can be super fun and an engaging way to have students take in information. If it gets overly loud or students are getting distracted. Feel free to use techniques to bring their attention back. Ex. “If you can hear me, clap once...If you can hear me, clap twice”. Or “1-2-3 all eyes on me”... “We are going to be sitting criss-cross apple sauce - please keep your hands to yourself”. The teachers will most likely have their own techniques that you can utilize if need be.
- Make sure to give the students time to ask questions at the end of the story
- Ask Summarizing Questions to review: What is this story called? Who does it come from? Who was in the story? What have you learned? What questions do you have?

Three Sisters Intercropping Explanation:

“Now that you have learned the story of the three sisters’ we are going to be going into the garden to make our very own garden!”

Explain the theory aspect of the garden, topics that can be covered:

- Symbiotic Relationships
- Soil science related (Valeria get nerdy with these kids!)
- Basics of shade, water retention, growing rates, and under the ground action
- Nutrition (see coloring handout)

Talking Points from “Growing Native American Heritage: Three Sisters Lesson Plan by Kirsten Gerbatsch, Michigan”:

- The Three Sisters was traditionally grown by the Iroquois nation and American Indians who inhabited the northeastern or Eastern Woodland region of North America.
- Many native peoples developed a strong cultural, familial, and spiritual bond to the land. Agriculture enabled them to produce enough food to establish large villages with as many as 1,000 persons living at one site for 10-20 years.
- Corn, beans and squash were very important crops, while hunting provided most of the protein in their diet.
- The Three Sisters supplement and complement each other when grown together. The corn grows tall and supports the tendrils of the bean plants as they grow upward toward the sunshine. The squash plants, which sends shoots with huge leaves across the ground, protects the soil from the drying sunshine and helps the soil beneath to retain moisture so that all three plants may thrive.
- Corns, beans, and squash supplement and complement each other when eaten together. It is a healthy, balanced meal.
- Corn provides food for us as a grain and carbohydrate, beans for protein and fiber, and squash for vitamin A.

- This tradition is based on the circle of life or the idea that all living things rely on each other for survival.

- The traditional Three Sisters garden forms an ecosystem by creating a community of plants. This system creates a beneficial relationship between the three plants-each plant helps the others grow. This is a form of companion planting.

Garden Demo & Explanation:

Break the students up into 4 groups- the mound builders, the corn, bean, and the squash (or alternatively the weeders, mound builders, the corn, the label makers). These groups will correlate to their task in the garden, remind the students that each of the roles is important just like all of the sisters are important while being different. Encourage the students to have a “team mind set” - You can say things like “I love your team work”, or “let’s go team” or “let’s give a round of applause for our weeders/label makers/corn/mound builders”.

Usually, teachers will have a specific way of leaving the classroom – in a line or a specific order. The students will usually know exactly what it is and already are making the line. Feel free to allow them to do what they are used to.

Note: When things go “wrong” remind the students that gardening is all about “making and learning from mistakes”. I love to cheer on errors, I will say something like “It’s okay, we all make mistakes”... or “I LOVE that you tried that, let’s try again” or “Yay! A mistake, now we can relearn”. When I make mistakes, I might say “Oops, I made a mistake! That’s okay, let me try again”.

Note: If there is a child who needs extra attention, make them your “special helper”. Give them a task that will give them a sense of responsibility and a leadership role. This helps the student to channel their energy and to contribute their enthusiasm for the group. For example, they can carry the seeds to the garden or be in charge of leading the line.

Gardening Demonstration:

“We are going to be building mounds, planting seeds, and labeling the garden together but first let me show you how to do it.”

While doing this, make sure all the students can see and that they can ask questions. Repeat yourself 2-3 times per step. Ask questions like “What do you think is the next step” and to praise them after each step is done. Remind the students what their individual tasks are, remind them that they can always ask for help.

Make sure to have 1 adult per group or alternatively bounce between the group explaining what they are doing, what materials they need, and to help with any confusion that may arise.

Remind the students that the seeds, soil, and each one of them are special so we must take care to be gentle with each other.

Note: Children who have are sensitive or have sensory needs may NOT want to get dirty or if they do, they may need to wash their hands immediately. If that is the case, offer to have that be available or alternatively ask if they would like to do a coloring project instead or have them help you give instructions on what to do. Remember to thank them for sharing and to remind the students that “we all learn in different ways and have different needs”.

Note: If you see behavior that you like...you can say things like “I love the care you showed the corn sister” or “I love your team work” or “thank you for sharing”.

Instructions from “Exploration: Plant a Three Sisters Garden” (Kidsgardening.org):

1. Plan and select a site. Choose a site that has direct sunshine for most of the day and access to water.
2. Prepare the soil. First, break up and rake the soil. Next, build a mound about 12 inches high and between 18 inches and 3 feet in diameter. If you’re in a dry area, flatten the top of the mound and make a shallow depression to keep water from running off. The number of mounds your students create depends on the size of your growing area. Mounds should be 3 to 4 feet apart in all directions.
3. Plant corn. Plant four to seven soaked or unsoaked corn seeds about 6 inches apart in the center of each mound. (You’ll eventually thin to three or four seedlings.) Many Native people honor the tradition of giving thanks to the “Four Directions” by orienting the corn seeds to the north, south, east, and west.
4. Plant beans and squash. After a week or two, when the corn is at least 4 inches high, plant six pole bean seeds in a circle about 6 inches away from the corn. (You’ll eventually thin to three or four bean seedlings.) At about the same time, plant four squash or pumpkin seeds next to the mound, about a foot away from the beans, eventually thinning to one. If you are planting a large area, you can also sow the squash in separate mounds (1 foot in diameter) between every few corn and bean mounds.

Wrap Up:

This can be done in the classroom or in the garden, thank the students for helping plant the three sisters. You may want to do an applause or an all-class cheer. You can tell them the things that you saw that you like, for example “I saw that you all worked so hard, asked questions, and helped each other out”

To engage the students, ask summarizing questions like:

- What have you learned from this lesson?
- Now that have gardened, what are you grateful for?
- What have you learned about sisterhood or teamwork?
- Can you tell me one positive thing you saw happen within your group?
- What was your favorite activity?
- Who does this story and growing method come from?

In between their responses, give a brief summary of the story and the lesson. Give the students an opportunity to ask questions. This is a good time to say thank you to the teachers, students, and the three sisters. You can also pass out their take home seeds and instructions.