



# *Thee-Sisters Garden Growing Guide*

*Corn, beans, and squash have a unique symbiotic relationship in a Native American garden. . . . This ancient style of companion planting has played a key role in the survival of all people in North America. . . .*

Mardi Dodson - ATTRA

## **History and Modern Adaption**

Native American Indian tribes have grown the Three Sisters Trio over the centuries, developing many plant varieties and gardening styles suitable to major climatic regions. The Wampanoag (Northeast and South), Hidatsa (Plains), and Zuni waffle garden (Southwest) offer a range of gardening styles to accommodate most growing conditions found in North America. However, those styles may not be adaptable to modern gardening practices and personal preferences. The following are some suggestions of how gardeners can adapt the Three Sisters plantings.

## **What to Plant**

Native American Indians planted several varieties of corn suited for drying and grinding. Today gardeners are more interested in sweet corn (called “green” corn by Native Americans) for eating fresh. Sweet corn has a shorter growing season than flower corn, so it is best paired with a pole variety of snap bean that will mature in about the same time frame. Likewise, if your Sisters Planting is sweet corn based a vining variety of summer squash is preferable because of the shorter season requirement than winter squash. It is important to use a squash or melon variety that grows vines and leave the more compact bush varieties for other planting associations.

The following are some possible combinations for Three Sisters plantings:

### Heritage Varieties:

Chapalote Pinole Maiz - Hopi Pinto Beans - Hopi Pumpkin (Jardín de Esperanza Demonstration)  
Flower Corn - Pinto Beans - Pumpkin or Watermelon - any heritage varieties

### Heirloom Varieties:

Bloody Butcher Corn - Pole Bean - Vining Crookneck/Zucchini Squash or Melon  
Golden Bantam Sweet Corn - Pole Snap Bean - Vining Squash or Melon

### Modern Varieties:

Sweet Corn - Pole Snap Bean - Vining Squash or Mellon

## **When to Plant**

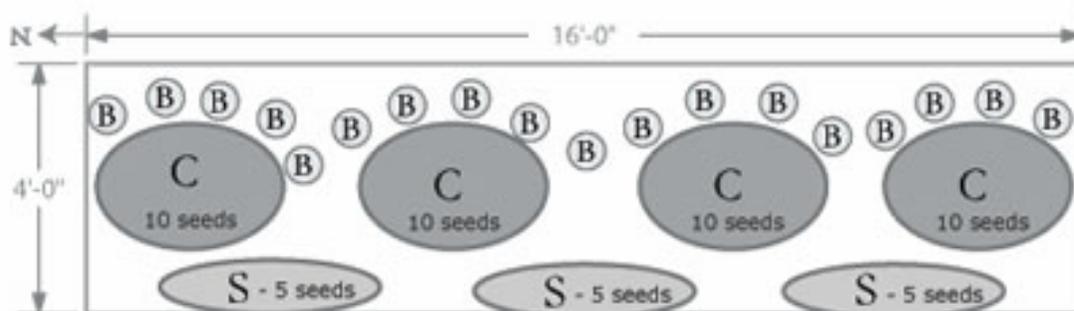
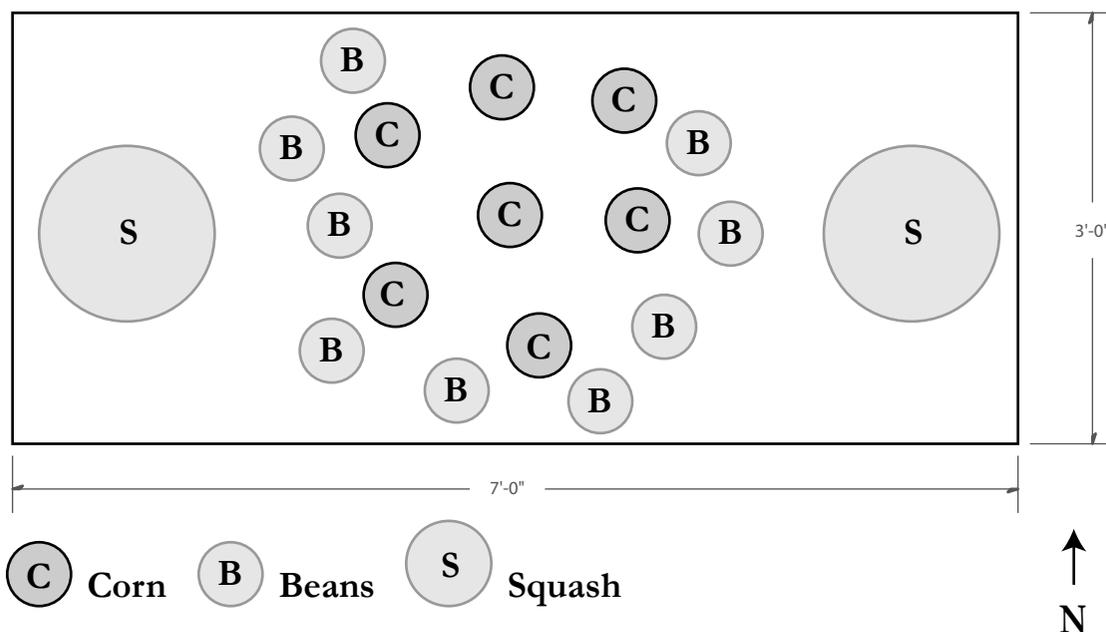
All of the Three Sisters varieties are warm season cultivars that can be started after the last frost date - mid-March and mid-April. Three Sisters beds can also be planted by the monsoon season - last week in June or early July. It is not advisable to begin a planting after mid-August.

### Planting Date Suggestions:

April 1st - all combinations  
June 15th - all combinations  
August 1st - sweet corn/snap bean/summer squash - only

## Modern Three Sisters Bed Layouts:

### Jardín de Esperanza Community Garden Three Sisters Plan



A Larger Garden Three Sisters Bed Plan

## Planting Instructions:

You can plant the corn two weeks ahead of the beans and squash or plant all three at the same time.

**Corn** - plant seeds 2-4 inches deep in a 3 ft. circle with at least 6 corn plants for better pollination and support - when the silks show, shake the corn plants every morning to aid pollination.

**Beans** - plant seeds 1 inch deep and within a few inches of the corn plants - they will use the corn plants for support.

**Squash/Mellon** - plants 3-5 seeds for each squash or melon cluster. Thin out to the one or two strongest plants. Train the vines so they provide shade but do not shade out the bean seedlings.

**Seed Sources:** - Heritage Varieties - [www.nativeseeds.org](http://www.nativeseeds.org), Heirloom Varieties - [www.rareseeds.com](http://www.rareseeds.com)