

Respect, Balance and Health:

The Three Sisters' Contribution to Native Americans

Pride in Our Heritage, Honor Our Ancestors is the theme for the 2010 National Native American Heritage Month, which is celebrated throughout the month of November. One of the first advocates for this month of recognition was Dr. Arthur C. Parker, a Seneca Indian, who was the Director of the Museum of Arts and Science in Rochester, NY. .

Parker's tribe, the Seneca, is one of six tribes that make up the Iroquois Confederacy, or Six Nations. The other five Nations in the Iroquois Confederacy are the Oneida, Mohawk, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Tuscarora. The Iroquois developed a highly sophisticated and intelligent agricultural practice that, in many ways, symbolizes the respect and balance for the environment, community, and ancestors who are so sacred to Native Americans and their heritage.

The Three Sisters crop consists of corn, beans and squash, grown together. For the Iroquois, also known as Haudenosaunee (had-dee-no-show-nee) or People of the Long House, the Three Sisters is more than a crop; it represents the harmony and balance of life that nourish and keep the community strong. Today, the Three Sisters are being used to return physical health and vitality back to many Native Americans.

When grown together, the Three Sisters' capacity to thrive is due to their remarkable dependence on each other. The strong corn stalk provides support for the beans. The beans have the ability to convert nitrogen gas from the air into a form plants can absorb from the soil. Corn and squash don't have this ability and thus rely on this steady source of nutrition supplied by the bean plants. Squash's large, leaves provide shade for the bean and corn seedlings while its thick, prickly tangle of vines provide a natural barrier to animal pests.

The Iroquois were acutely aware that the Three Sisters were also rich in nutrition and support each other in their ability to provide a complete balanced meal. Corn provides carbohydrates and a variety of amino acids (healthy proteins). Beans also contain protein plus two essential amino acids not found in corn. Squash is rich with vitamin A and the seeds contain essential fats that the corn and beans don't have.

Cordelia Clapp, Editor of Health Power's Native American/American Indian Channel, is a Pawnee Tribal member who works as a Tribal Nurse Consultant at the community, state, and national levels, and is a member of the American Heart Association's National Board. She emphasizes the cultural and nutritional significance of the Three Sisters, explaining that "There are three seeds but one whole. The elders planted these foods together because they (the plants) wanted to be together with each other like the Indians want to be together with each other. The elders thought as long as the Three Sisters were with us we would not starve." She adds, "It was a survival technique."

While the Three Sisters originates with the Iroquois, **today the crop is symbolic for the larger Native American community.** This community is comprised of over 800 Native American tribes across the U.S. (564 federally recognized and 226 unrecognized). Says Clapp, "While each tribe has its own diversity of foods and culture, we (Native Americans/American Indians) are grounded together with a similar belief system based on respect. Our elders are one of our greatest treasures. They tell us stories of the past and remind us of our heritage and who we are. They are our teachers, mentors and historians. We are taught the earth is the mother of all people and the soil you see is not ordinary soil – it's the dust of the blood, flesh, and bones of our ancestors. The Indian people continue to value their relationship with the earth and draw strength from it. We believe the relationship between the Three Sisters is the work of a force more powerful than man. The Three Sisters are a symbol of the balance between good health and spirituality."

Today, the Oneida Nation (one of the Six Iroquois Nations) developed the Three Sisters nutrition project in an effort to use these healthy foods to combat modern diseases such as heart disease, diabetes, and high blood pressure.

The Manataka American Indian Council has posted recipes of the Three Sisters. Try fresh corn and zucchini soup with Seneca ghost bread topped with a spiced squash butter. Or perhaps the Three Sisters enchiladas and bean soup will fill you up on a cold November evening. You can find these recipes and more on our [Food & Fitness Channel](#) under [Cultural Specific Recipes for Native Americans](#) and on the Manataka American Indian Council website at: <http://www.manataka.org/page175.html>.

Sources:

<http://onondaganation.org/>

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