



**Grade Level:** 3-5

**Essential Skills:** 1, 2, 4, 5, 9

**CCSS:** 3.RF.4, 3.RI.1, 3.SL.1, 3.SL.2, 4.RF.4, 4.RI.1, 4.SL.1, 5.RF.4, 5.RI.2, 5.SL.1

**Social Science:** 4.14

**NGSS:** 5-LS1

**Time:** 50 minutes

**Materials:**

**Three Sisters Garden Kit\* or:  
Per Student**

- 1 plastic glove
- 5 cotton balls
- 5 seeds of squash, beans and corn.
- *Three Sisters Investigation* worksheet
- *Three Sisters Legends* handout

**AITC Library Resources:**

**Books:**

Our School Garden  
Pumpkins  
How many seeds in a pumpkin?  
From Seed to Pumpkin

**More Lessons:**

Turf Buddies  
Seed, Soil, Sun  
Living Necklaces

## Three Sisters Garden

**Description:**

Students will investigate the “three sisters” crops (corn, beans, and squash) and explore the benefit to planting these crops together.

**Activity Directions:**

**Part 1: Introduction to Vegetables**

1. Read the book *The Vegetables we Eat* by Gail Gibbons.

2. Ask students the following questions:

- a. Why are vegetables an important part of our diet?
- b. What are the basic needs of plants?

3. Explain to students that vegetables are a very important part of our diets and Native American’s diets. Today, we are going to explore the three vegetables that many Native American tribes refer to as the “Three Sisters.”

**Part 2: Legend of the Three Sisters**

1. Ask your students if they know what a legend is. After students have offered their own ideas and prior knowledge, explain to your students that a legend is a way of passing stories from generation to generation. Legends are very important in many Native American cultures.

2. Explain to your class that they will be investigating the legend of the Three Sisters which focuses on the agriculture and food production techniques used by some Native Americans. The three sisters refer to three vegetable crops that were commonly planted together – corn, beans and squash.

3. Provide each student with a copy of the *Three Sisters Investigation* worksheet. Have students complete question one with their current knowledge of corn, beans and squash.

4. Divide your class into groups of 3 or 4 or individually assign readings. Provide each group or student with one of the *Three Sisters Legends* handouts.

5. Instruct the students to read through their assigned legend and record characteristics of each sister in their chart on the *Three Sisters Investigation* worksheet. After, discuss each of the legend readings as a class, having students share the characteristics of each sister (plant) with the whole class. Students should also decide which crop each sister in their legend represents.

6. As a class, discuss how the legends relate to how the three sisters can help each other when planted together. For example: Several of the legends describe the sisters “becoming stronger together” or “three sisters helping and loving each other”. Examples of how the actual crops benefit each other include the corn providing a trellis or pole for the bean to climb. The bean provides nitrogen to the soil to help the corn grow. The squash prevents weeds from growing and deters pests.

**Part 3: Planting a Three Sisters Garden**

Allow students the opportunity to explore the three sisters growing through germination in a glove.

1. Instruct students to write their name on the palm section of a clear plastic glove with a marker. Also, label each finger with the following each type of seed they will be planting in the glove.

2. Dip five cotton balls in water. Give each cotton ball 3 flat squeezes to wring out excess water.

3. Place the provided seeds on a small paper plate or paper towel and pick up with a moistened cotton ball.

4. Put the cotton ball with the seeds attached into the matching labeled finger in your glove.

Teacher Tip: You may need to use a pencil to get the cotton ball all the way to the tips of the glove fingers.

5. Repeat steps three and four with the additional cotton balls and seeds.

6. Tape the glove to a window, chalkboard, or wall. A clothesline can also be used with clothespins holding the gloves on the line.

7. Germination will take place in 3-5 days. The cotton balls should stay moist through germination. If one or more appear dry you can add a little water with an eyedropper or spray bottle. Germinated seeds can be transplanted in 1-2 weeks. Cut the tip off each finger and pull out the germinated seeds (cotton ball and all), and transplant into a container with soil.



## Three Sisters #1

The three sisters are Corn, Beans, and Squash. They are seen as the three beautiful sisters because they grow in the same mound in the garden. The Corn provides a ladder for the Bean Vine. They together give shade to the Squash. The Cherokee till the mound three times.

The Native American stories of the Three Sisters vary from tribe to tribe. This story below is taken from an oral account by Lois Thomas of Cornwall Island, compiled by students at Centennial College and found in "Indian Legends of Eastern Canada."

### 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.

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.

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.

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.



## Three Sisters #2

The following story, entitled "The Three Sisters," was recorded by Lois Thomas of Cornwall Island, Canada. It is one of a collection of stories compiled by students at Centennial College, Toronto, Canada. Out of respect to native culture, we ask that you share the story in a spirit of respect.

Once upon a time very long ago, there were three sisters who lived together in a field. These sisters were quite different from one another in their size and also in their way of dressing. One of the three was a little sister, so young that she could only crawl at first, and she was dressed in green. The second of the three wore a frock of bright yellow, and she had a way of running off by herself when the sun shone and the soft wind blew in her face. The third was the eldest sister, standing always very straight and tall above the other sisters and trying to guard them. She wore a pale green shawl, and she had long, yellow hair that tossed about her head in the breezes.

There was only one way in which the three sisters were alike. They loved one another very dearly, and they were never separated. They were sure that they would not be able to live apart.

After a while a stranger came to the field of the three sisters, a little Indian boy. He was as straight as an arrow and as fearless as the eagle that circled the sky above his head. He knew the way of talking to the birds and the small brothers of the earth, the shrew, the chipmunk, and the young foxes. And the three sisters, the one who was just able to crawl, the one in the yellow frock, and the one with the flowing hair, were very much interested in the little Indian boy. They watched him fit his arrow in his bow, saw him carve a bowl with his stone knife, and wondered where he went at night.

Late in the summer of the first coming of the Indian boy to their field, one of the three sisters disappeared. This was the youngest sister in green, the sister who could only creep. She was scarcely able to stand alone in the field unless she had a stick to which she clung. Her sisters mourned for her until the fall, but she did not return.

Once more the Indian boy came to the field of the three sisters. He came to gather reeds at the edge of a stream nearby to make arrow shafts. The two sisters who were left watched him and gazed with wonder at the prints of his moccasins in the earth that marked his trail.

That night the second of the sisters left, the one who was dressed in yellow and who always wanted to run away. She left no mark of her going, but it may have been that she set her feet in the moccasin tracks of the little Indian boy.

Now there was but one of the sisters left. Tall and straight she stood in the field not once bowing her head with sorrow, but it seemed to her that she could not live there alone. The days grew shorter and the nights were colder. Her green shawl faded and grew thin and old. Her hair, once long and golden, was tangled by the wind. Day and night she sighed for her sisters to return to her, but they did not hear her. Her voice when she tried to call to them was low and plaintive like the wind.

But one day when it was the season of the harvest, the little Indian boy heard the crying of the third sister who had been left to mourn there in the field. He felt sorry for her, and he took her in his arms and carried her to the lodge of his father and mother. Oh what a surprise awaited here there! Her two lost sisters were there in the lodge of the little Indian boy, safe and very glad to see her. They had been curious about the Indian boy, and they had gone home with him to see how and where he lived. They had liked his warm cave so well that they had decided now that winter was coming on to stay with him. And they were doing all they could to be useful.

The little sister in green, now quite grown up, was helping to keep the dinner pot full. The sister in yellow sat on the shelf drying herself, for she planned to fill the dinner pot later. The third sister joined them, ready to grind meal for the Indian boy. And the three were never separated again.



## Three Sisters #3

Legends and Myths: The “Three Sisters” as told by Shelia Wilson from Tar Heel Junior Historian 45:1 (fall 2005).

When Native people speak of the “Three Sisters,” they are referring to corn, beans, and squash.

Known as the “sustainers of life,” these are the basic foods of sustenance. They are seen as three beautiful sisters, because they grow in the same mound in a garden. The corn provides a ladder for the bean vine. The squash vines shade the mound and hold moisture in the soil for the corn and beans. The well-being of each crop planted is said to be protected by another.

Many stories have been woven around the Three Sisters—sisters who should be planted together, eaten together, and celebrated together. Traditional stories vary from tribe to tribe. The story of the “Three Sisters” originated when a woman of medicine who could no longer bear the fighting among her three daughters asked the Creator to help her find a way to get them to stop. That night she had a dream, and in it each sister was a different seed. In her dream, she planted them in one mound in just the way they would have lived at home and told them that in order to grow and thrive; they would need to be different but dependent upon each other. They needed to see that each was special and each had great things to offer on her own and with the others. The next morning while cooking breakfast, she cooked each daughter an egg, but each was different: one hard-boiled, one scrambled, and one over-easy. She told her daughters of her dream and said to them, “You are like these eggs. Each is still an egg but with different textures and flavors. Each of you has a special place in the world and in my heart.” The daughters started to cry and hugged each other, because now they would celebrate their differences and love one another more because of them. From that day on, Native people have planted the three crops together—Three Sisters helping and loving each other.



## Three Sisters Investigation

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Before reading, list facts and characteristics that describe each of the *Three Sisters* crops.

Corn	Beans	Squash

List characteristics of each of the Three Sisters from the legend you read.

Sister #1	Sister #2	Sister #3

Answer the following questions related to the reading.

1. Which crop does Sister #1 represent in the legend? (Corn, beans or squash) Explain why.

2. Which crop does Sister #2 represent in the legend? (Corn, beans or squash) Explain why.

3. Which crop does Sister #3 represent in the legend? (Corn, beans or squash) Explain why.

4. Describe how the three sisters support each other according to the legend.