



Heritage Plants Activities

The Three Sisters: **A Traditional Aboriginal Story and Activity about Corn, Beans and Squash** *adapted from the City of Toronto Children's Garden Program*

Grade level: Grades 1 – 6

Provincial curriculum links: Ontario

Subject: Language, Social Studies

Keywords: Aboriginal, Iroquois, three sisters, corn, beans, squash, legend, companion plants

Description

Students learn about companion planting and how plants can be combined to provide complete nutrition through the telling of an Aboriginal legend about the Three Sisters: corn, beans and squash. Students then discuss the legend, illustrate it, and think of other plants which grow together in a similar way.

Background: The Iroquois (Hodeneshone) were agricultural people who lived along the eastern shores of Lake Ontario in Canada, and in northern New York State below the St. Lawrence River. Among the good spirits of the Iroquois are the three sisters who reside over their favourite vegetables - corn, beans and squash. They are represented as loving one another very dearly and dwelling together in peace and unity. The vines of the vegetables grow upon the same soil and cling lovingly to one another. The spirit of corn is draped over the corn with its green leaves and silken tassels which represent a green shawl and long blond hair. The sister who guards the bean has the garments of velvety green pods and delicate tendrils, while the spirit of the squash is clothed with the brilliant yellow blossoms. On bright nights you may be able to see the spirit of the three sisters flitting about or hear them rustling amongst the tall corn.

Curriculum Framework

Language: Oral and Visual Communication (Gr. 1 – 6)

Social Studies: Canada and World Connections – The Local Community (Gr. 1); Heritage and Citizenship – Traditions and Celebrations (Gr. 2); Heritage and Citizenship – Early Settlements in Upper Canada (Gr. 3); Heritage and Citizenship – Early Civilizations (Gr. 5); Heritage and Citizenship – First Nations Peoples and European Explorers (Gr. 6)

Science and Technology: Life Systems – Growth and Changes in Plants (Gr. 3); Life Systems – Habitats and Communities (Gr. 4)

Health and Physical Education: Healthy Living (Gr. 1 – 6)

Preparation

Preparation Time: 20 min

Length of Lesson: 40 – 60 min

Resources Required:

- copy of the Story of the Three Sisters (included here)
- art materials for students to illustrate the Story of the Three Sisters (e.g. paint, coloured pencils, paper)
- colour pictures of heritage varieties of corn, beans and squash and/or samples of the real thing

Procedure

Get your audience to find a space to themselves on the lawn or floor. They can lie on their backs or sit up, but encourage them to keep their eyes closed as you read the story. This will allow their mind's eye to take over their imagination. Before you begin, get them to take three deep cleansing breaths to get them ready to listen and to imagine.

The Story of the Three Sisters

Probable Source:

"The Native American story of the Three Sisters varies from tribe to tribe. This version of the story most likely stems from an oral account by Lois Thomas of Cornwall Island, compiled by students at Centennial College and found in Indian Legends of Eastern Canada." For more information see <http://www.birdclan.org/threesisters.htm>

Once upon a time there were three sisters who lived together in a field. These sisters were quite different from one another in their size, shape and way of dressing. One of the three was a little sister, so young that she could only crawl at first, and if she wanted to stand up she had to twine herself around her eldest sister. This sister wore velvet green with delicate tendril ribbons. The second of the three sisters, wore a frock of bright yellow and had a way of running off across the field when the sun shone and the soft wind blew in her face. The third sister was the eldest. She was always standing very straight and tall above the other sisters trying to guard them.

There was only one way in which the three sisters were alike. They loved one another very much and were never separated. They were sure that they wouldn't be able to live apart.

After a while, a stranger came to the sister's field. It was a little Iroquois boy. He was as straight as an arrow and as fearless as the eagle that circled his head far above in the sky. He knew the way of talking to the birds and the small brothers of the earth, the mouse, the groundhog, the chipmunk, squirrel and fox. The three sisters were very interested in this little Iroquois boy. They watched him fit his arrow in his bow, saw him carve a bowl with his knife and wondered where he went at night.

Late that summer, the youngest sister in green velvet who couldn't stand up without the help of her big sister, disappeared. Her sisters mourned for her until the fall, but she did not return.

Once again the little Iroquois boy came to the three sister's field. He came to gather reeds at the edge of the nearby stream to make arrow shafts. The two sisters who were left watched him and gazed at him with wonder at the prints of his moccasins marking his trail to the field.

That night the second of the sisters disappeared. This time it was the sister who dressed in brilliant yellow and always wanted to run off across the field. She left no mark of her going but it may have been that she set her feet in the moccasin tracks of the little Iroquois boy.

Now there was only one sister 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 bear to live in her field alone. The days grew shorter and the night grew colder. Her green shawl faded and grew thin and old. Her hair once long and golden was now brown and 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 them was low and sad like the wind.

But one day when it was the season of the final harvest, the little Iroquois boy heard the crying of the third sister. He felt sorry for her so he took her in his arms and carried her to the lodge of his father and mother. Oh what a surprise awaited her! Her two lost sisters were there in the lodge of the little Iroquois boy, safe and very glad to see her. They had been curious about the boy and they had gone home with him to see how and where he lived. They had liked his warm longhouse so well that they decided to stay there for the cold winter. 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 some meal for the Iroquois family's bread. Ever since then the three sisters spend their spring and summers in the field together, and their winters in the longhouse, helping to feed the family of the little Iroquois boy. And the three have never been separated since.

Every child of today should know these three sisters and need them just as much as the little Iroquois boy did. For the little sister is the bean who needs the eldest sister to keep her from crawling along the ground. The second sister is the squash, who has bright yellow flowers and tends to run away across the field. The eldest sister is the corn. Her kernels can be dried and ground up to make flour for bread. When the corn beans and squash are eaten, they provide a very nutritious meal with everything a person needs to be healthy.

Discussion and Activities

1) Discuss the plants in the legend. Who were the Three Sisters and in what ways did they help each other grow? Context: The Three Sisters are called companion plants. The corn provides a pole for the beans to grow up. The squash leaves shade the ground to keep it cool and moist. And when the bean plants are old and die, they release nitrogen into the soil and restore the nutrients that the corn and squash sucked out of the soil during the summer.

2) How did the Three Sisters help the Iroquois boy and his family? For older students, discuss in detail the nutritional completeness of corns, beans and squash: the three staples have complementary amino acids which combine to make a complete meatless protein. Together, corn, beans and squash also provide complex carbohydrates, fibre, iron and a variety of essential vitamins, such as beta carotene which is converted into vitamin A in the body, as well as vitamins B and C.

3) Have students draw or paint pictures of the Three Sisters' story.

4) Have students rehearse and act out the Three Sisters' story.

Student Evaluation

- Oral communication – observe students as they contribute to the discussions.
- Evaluate students' work for effort, content and completeness.

Enrichment and Extension Activities

- Look around the garden for other plants that grow well together. Write a legend or draw a picture.
- Prepare food from a First Nations recipe that uses corn, beans and/or squash.