Growing Native American Heritage: Three Sisters

Lesson Plan by FoodCorps Service Member Kirsten Gerbatsch, Michigan

Theme:
Food and Culture

Grade Level: 3-5

Subject Area: Social Studies

Summary:
This activity explores the foods, the customs, and the stories that evolved from the planting of corn, beans, and squash—the Three Sisters—which is a tradition of several Native American tribes from the northeastern region of North America. The lesson also uses myths/legends and traditional stories to teach about American Indians beliefs and cultures.

Learning Objectives:

- Students will gain a better understanding of Native American culture in the Northeastern
  region through looking at an Iroquois gardening method.
- Students will explore the foods, customs, and stories of this Native American tradition.
- Students will learn about the agricultural practice of planting corn, beans, and squash. Through gardening, students will learn about tending and growing these plants.
- Students will learn about the unique nutritional value of eating corn, beans, and squash as a meal. Through cooking a Three Sisters meal, students will learn simple culinary skills and be exposed to a new food culture.

Prep Time: 15 minutes to gather needed materials

Time: 30-45 minutes (without Next Steps: Gardening or Cooking Extension activities)

Materials:

- Legend of the Three Sisters story
- Worksheets for each student
- A squash, corn, and bean image or visual

Lesson Procedure:

1. Read the Legend of the Three Sisters together as a class. The legend can be found online at: http://blogs.cornell.edu/garden/get-activities/signature-projects/the-three-sisters-exploring-an-iroquois-garden/a-legend/ or attached to this lesson plan.
2. Students can act out the legend while the teacher or students read the story out loud.
3. Use the worksheet to have a discussion about what students learned from the Three Sisters Legend. Answer the questions one by one as a whole class or have students complete the worksheets independently and then share answers as a class.

Key Concepts:

- The Three Sisters was traditionally grown by the Iroquois nation and American Indians who inhabited the northeastern or Eastern Woodland region of North America.
- The Indians developed a strong cultural 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 compliment 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 compliment 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 Native American 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.

Wrap up:

Review answers to the questions on the worksheet as a class. Allow students to ask questions and reflect on the legend of the Three Sisters and the significance of the agricultural practice and nutrition from these foods. If you will not be cooking a Three Sisters dish as a class, then pass out the attached recipe for students to bring home and cook with their parents.

Lesson Resources and Credit for Adaption:

This lesson and the materials to supplement this lesson and activity have been adapted from Cornell University and the Cornell Garden-Based Learning blog.

- http://blogs.cornell.edu/garden/get-activities/signature-projects/the-three-sisters-exploring-an-iroquois-garden/

Name _____

There is so much to learn about the Three Sisters crops and the farming & food cultures of Native American people…

Who are the Three Sisters? Write their names below next to their picture.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Why did Native Americans plant corn, squash, and beans together in the field? Why did they grow these three crops together?

Why did they eat corn, squash, and beans together in a meal? Is there something special about these foods when they are eaten together?

Extensions:

- Plant the Three Sisters Garden in your school or community garden.

How to Plant the Three Sisters: **http://blogs.cornell.edu/garden/get-activities/signature-projects/the-three-sisters-exploring-an-iroquois-garden/how-to-plant-the-three-sisters/**

- Cook a Three Sisters Meal together as a class. See recipe for a Three Sisters Stew attached.

Three Sisters Stew

Preparation time: 30-40 minutes
Serves: 6 to 8 people

Ingredients:

3 cups pinto or kidney beans
2-3 cloves garlic, minced
2 teaspoons dried oregano
1 teaspoon cumin seeds
1/2 teaspoon cinnamon
1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil
1 medium onion, chopped
1 1/2 teaspoons sea salt
2-3 cups winter squash, cut in chunks
14-oz can chopped tomatoes
1 tablespoon chile powder
1 1/2 cups fresh or frozen corn
8-10 tablespoons grated cheese, as garnish

Steps:

1. In large pot, quickly dry-toast oregano, cumin seeds, and cinnamon for about seconds.
2. Add oil, onion, salt, and garlic. Sauté until onions are soft.
3. Add squash, tomatoes, and chile powder and cook about 20 minutes, until squash is soft. Add some water if mixture seems dry.
4. Add cooked beans and corn; simmer until corn is tender. Season to taste.
5. Serve hot and enjoy!

The following story, entitled "The Three Sisters," was recorded by Lois Thomas of Cornwall Island, Canada. It is one of a collection of legends compiled by students at Centennial College, Toronto, Canada.

Out of respect to native culture, we ask that you share the legend in a spirit of respect.

A Legend: "The Three Sisters"

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 awhile 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.