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Companion gardening: 'Three sisters' help each other grow

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Backyard gardens and farmers markets are full of colorful squashes as well as corn, beans, tomatoes and peppers.

What went into growing these vegetables?

Savvy gardeners practice something called companion planting, or putting fruits and vegetables that grow well together in the same, small plot of soil. This method of gardening has been around for more than 2,000 years.

In fact, American Indians first used the practice to plant corn, beans and squash.

According to legend, in the first garden there were three sisters. Corn, the first sister, grew, but not very well.

The second sister, beans, asked corn if she could use her stalks to climb upon. In return, beans would supply corn much-needed nitrogen. The two sisters grew, but weeds took away water and prevented the two from flourishing.

The third sister, squash, with her prickly leaves and vines, offered to crawl beneath corn and beans. She could keep weeds from growing and would shade the soil and keep it moist.

And so the three sisters grew splendidly together, providing food for a balanced diet in a single plot of land.

For American Indians in New Mexico there has been a movement "to renew and revitalize the traditional foodways of native peoples by restoring land, saving heirloom seeds, propagating native plants, gathering wild food and cooking and nutrition classes," says author, native food historian Lois Ellen Frank.

Frank, who is part-Kiowa, says the shift from a plant-based diet to one that includes more meat and processed foods, has created an epidemic of diabetes among American Indians. Frank has been at the forefront of a movement to get indigenous people to return to the plant-based diet of their ancestors.

In Utah, students from kindergarten to eighth grade also are learning about the three sisters through classes offered by Wasatch Community Gardens. During a spring session, children performed a play to represent the plants, said youth educator Krystal Rogers.

"The kids who were corn stood up and waved their hands above their heads just as corn is strong and provides



Steve Griffin | The Salt Lake Tribune Gardeners have long known that some vegetables grow best when plotted together. Squash, corn and beans are a prime example.

support for beans to climb. Kids who were beans began running between the corn and climbing up the corn. The 'squash' kids would spread out their hands wide to mimic big leaves and crawl on the ground to act as living mulch to shade out the weeds to help corn and beans to grow.”

After the play, the children planted the three vegetables in the youth garden at 800 South and 600 East in Salt Lake City. They planted the corn at the end of March or beginning of April, pole beans at the end of April and squash quickly followed.

Once it was time to harvest the fruits of their labor, the students took home the produce, along with recipes on how to cook them.

Frank plants her “three sisters” garden in a 10-by-10-foot space. Along with indigenous heirloom corn, she plants a variety of ancient beans, including black turtle and tepary beans that are well suited for a desert environment. As for squash, Frank prefers winter varieties such as acorn, butternut and pumpkin. Sometimes she will even add a “fourth sister” — flowering Rocky Mountain bee plants or butterfly bushes — to help bring pollinators to the garden.

Bountiful resident, Marsha Bradbury, has cultivated a garden for more than 25 years. She has been planting the “three sisters” for three years, after she started reading books about it and her son, who lives out of state, got her to consider the idea.

Bradbury sticks to heirloom and organic varieties for her companion garden. This year she planted ruby red corn, adzuki beans and other pole beans and patty pan, sweet dumpling and acorn squashes. Bradbury’s companion plants grow in a 6-foot-by-4-foot area in her 100-square-foot garden.

While Bradbury’s 89-year-old mother, Geneal Smith, is busy canning, dehydrating and freezing the bounty, Bradbury can’t wait until January when she can put her new 340-square-foot root cellar to good use. She also will begin seedlings for her next garden, which is sure to include the “three sisters.”

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Fresh vegetable chilaquiles with eggs

1 1/2 tablespoons vegetable oil

5 small corn tortillas, each cut into 8 wedges

1 jalapeño chile, seeded and sliced

1/2 of one onion, diced

1 zucchini, diced

1/2 cup corn kernels

1 ripe tomato, diced

3 tablespoons canned diced green chiles

Salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste

3 large eggs, lightly beaten

1/2 cup grated Monterey Jack cheese

Hot sauce for serving

Heat oil in a large, preferably nonstick, frying pan over medium-high heat. When hot, add tortilla wedges, in batches to avoid crowding, and cook until slightly browned on the bottom, about 2 minutes. Turn tortillas and brown the other sides, about 2 minutes longer. Remove from pan with a slotted spatula.

Add jalapeño, onion and zucchini to the pan and cook, stirring occasionally, until crisp-tender, 5 to 6 minutes. Reduce heat and add corn, tomato, and chiles. Cook for 2 minutes. Season with salt and pepper.

Add eggs, tortilla wedges and half the cheese to the vegetable mixture. Stir gently to combine, allow the eggs to set, then stir a bit to scramble until the eggs are no longer wet and shiny. Sprinkle in remaining cheese and season again with salt and pepper. Serve at once, passing the hot sauce at the table.

Serves • 2 to 3

Source: The Working Cook: Fast and Fresh Meals for Busy People, by Tara Duggan, The San Francisco Chronicle (2006)

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Garden checklist

Maggie Wolf, a certified professional horticulturist, suggests doing a variety of things to prepare for next year's garden.

Collect and share seeds; order free seed catalogs • Be sure to collect, share and purchase "true" seeds that have dominant traits and show the same characteristics as the parent plant. Seeds that are dry and stored in the freezer may last up to five years, depending on plant species. American Indian farmers can get free seeds to start a "three sister" garden from Nativeseeds.org.

Get soil tested • Send soil test samples to the Utah State University Analytical Laboratories to determine what your soil needs. Visit www.usual.usu.edu for forms and pricing information.

Add composted manure to soil. • Once you've rid your garden of old plants, now's the time to work in composted manure.

Plant a cover crop. • Cover crops such as Austrian winter peas, wheatgrass and annual rye will control weeds and prevent soil erosion. In the Spring, till the cover crop into the soil to add nitrogen.

Build a light structure to start your own seedlings. • You can begin planting vegetable seedlings as early as January.

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Three sisters sauté

Treat this dish as a side dish or place in your favorite tortilla. I use yellow corn tortillas.

1 teaspoon olive oil

1/2 of one white onion, diced

2 cloves garlic, finely chopped

2 cups organic zucchini, cut into ¼-inch cubes

1 1/2 cups cooked organic cranberry, pinto beans or one (15-ounce) can organic pinto beans

1 cup corn kernels, cut from the cobs of 2 ears oven-roasted corn (See note)

1/2 teaspoon kosher salt

1/8 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

1/4 cup roasted green chiles, peeled, seeded, deveined and chopped, optional

In a heavy frying pan over medium-high heat, warm olive oil until hot but not smoking. Cook onions until translucent, about 2 minutes. Add garlic and zucchini and cook for another 2 minutes. Add beans, corn kernels, and salt and pepper, stir. Cook, stirring constantly, for another 2 minutes. Remove from heat. Garnish with green chiles, if desired. Serve immediately. Serves • 6 to 8

Source: Adapted from Lois Ellen Frank

Note • To roast sweet corn, wet each ear of corn still in its husk and place on a rimmed baking sheet. Add enough water to cover the bottom of the tray, about 1/2 inch. Place in a 350-degree oven and roast for approximately 10 minutes. Remove from oven, turn the ears of corn and cook for an additional 10 minutes. Remove from the oven, peel the husks and cut the kernels from the cob. Discard the husks and cob. Use as instructed.

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Three sisters casserole

A Native American expression, “three sisters” refers to the practice of growing beans, corn and squash together. This filling casserole can be frozen for a party or made fresh for dinner.

Polenta topping

1 1/2 cups yellow cornmeal

1 tablespoon chili powder

3/4 teaspoon salt

Filling

3 tablespoons olive oil, divided

1 small onion, chopped (about 1 cup)

1 large red or yellow bell pepper, cut into 1-inch dice (about 1 cup)

1 pound kabocha squash, peeled and cut into 1-inch cubes (about 2 cups)

1 (15-ounce) can diced tomatoes with chiles

2 cloves garlic, minced

1 teaspoon ground coriander

1 teaspoon ground cumin

1/2 cup water

1/2 teaspoon salt

1 (15-ounce) can pinto beans, drained and rinsed

1 cup frozen corn kernels, thawed

For the topping, whisk together cornmeal, chili powder, salt and 4 1/2 cups water in double boiler, or in large metal bowl over barely simmering water. Cook 40 minutes, or until polenta is thick and stiff, stirring 3 or 4 times. Remove from heat.

For the filling, heat oven to 375 degrees. Heat 2 tablespoons oil in large saucepan over medium heat. Add onion, and cook 7 minutes, or until softened, stirring often. Add bell pepper, and cook 5 minutes more, stirring often.

Stir in squash, tomatoes, garlic, coriander and cumin. Cook 5 minutes, stirring occasionally. Stir in 1/2 cup water and salt. Bring mixture to a boil. Reduce heat to medium low, and simmer, partially covered, 10 to 15 minutes, or until squash is tender. Stir in beans and corn, and cook 5 minutes, or until slightly thickened, stirring occasionally.

Coat 8-by-11-inch baking dish with cooking spray. Spread 2 cups polenta over bottom of prepared dish. Spoon squash mixture over polenta. Smooth remaining polenta (about 2 1/2 cups) over top.

Score casserole into 6 squares with knife. Brush top with remaining 1 tablespoon oil. Bake 30 minutes, or until heated through and top is lightly browned. Serves • 6

Source: Vegetarian Times, Nov. 1, 2006

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