

THREE SISTERS: A RECIPE FOR LIFE

When we think of the phrase “three sisters,” we may be reminded of our own siblings or someone else’s, or we may be reminded of the ancient Greek myth of the three sisters who controlled the lifespan of each and every ordinary mortal: Clotho, the Spinner, who spun the thread of life; Lachesis, who measured each thread; and Atropos, who cut the thread which ended the human’s life. Their sole job was to ensure that each person lived as long as they were assigned by the gods.

However, a legend of three other sisters, perhaps not as well known, has been woven into the cultural memories of many indigenous groups. This legend is a part of almost every Native American culture in the United States from Alaska to Mexico. Although there are different versions of the legend, the Iroquois tribe tells the story of the Three Sisters this way:

Once there was a family with a mother, father, and three sisters. The parents worked hard at providing for the family, but like families today, they had to beg the daughters for help constantly. They also had to stop them from arguing and fighting continually. The three sisters were very different from one another, and each was unique in her own way: the eldest sister was tall and slender with long, silky, shiny blonde hair; the youngest was small but muscular and attractive in an earthy way, and the middle sister was average in height and looks but was beautiful in her giving nature.

For reasons unknown to their parents, although they loved one another as sisters, they disagreed on just about everything. If one sister said it was too hot, another sister said it was just right. The sisters seemed to spend more time arguing than anything else: the parents tried and tried to get the sisters to do small tasks in the garden and help with other household chores. But when the sisters were asked to work together, they always fought; when they were apart, they would complain about the others. The work wasn’t getting done, and the parents worried that if things continued this way, they wouldn’t make it through next winter. The parents prayed to the Creator for guidance and help each and every night before going to sleep.

One morning as the sun rose, which was about 6:15 in the morning, an unexpected solution appeared as if by magic. Walking to the garden, the sisters continued to argue. As they touched foot on the soil of the garden their father had plowed the day before, they were mysteriously transformed into three plants: a long, tall corn plant with silk tassel-like hair; a squash, a broad-leafed plant growing low to the ground with lovely yellow blossoms, and a bean plant with long, gentle vines and thick lush leaves with pink and purple blooms. Like magic, all three plants grew together in a mound with the vines winding around the tall plant and the broad leaves of the second sister covering the ground that held the other two sisters fast. The three sisters realized too late that harmony was essential to their lives.

The three sisters were to make up crops of indigenous people across South, Central, and North America: corn, squash, and beans. People from all over still plant their crops in this familiar pattern. Known as the Three Sisters, this garden-type forms an ecosystem of plants that creates a beneficial relationship between the three plants: each plant helps the others grow. The sister’s conflict was transformed into a harmonious relationship:

- The first sister is corn, whose tall stalks support the climbing beans.
- The second sister is squash, who grows over the mound and protects her sisters' roots from the sun and keeps the soil moist.
- The third sister is the bean, whose vines climb through the corn stalk to bind the three together.

These three sisters also provide a healthy nutritional balance: corn provides carbohydrates, but lacks two amino acids; squash, high in calories, adds vitamins and minerals and its seeds are a good source of protein; beans provide a source of protein and its amino acids complete what's missing in the corn. Not only do they harmonize in the field, but they also harmonize in the pot. Known universally as the "Three Sisters," they combine to make healthy and delicious stews and soups.

In addition to providing the rudiments of a delicious meal, the meaning of the Three Sisters Garden has become a part of the spiritual beliefs that sustain the community. The Iroquois believe that the three are special gifts from the Creator: the well-being of each crop is protected by the presence of the other sister spirits. The legend of the Three Sisters teaches us three important principles:

1. Everyone has something to offer. Each is equally important.
2. Everyone brings something different to the table.
3. Strength lies in diversity.

So, how do we cook the gifts the Three Sisters have given us? The main ingredients are simple: corn, beans, and squash. The rest are used to add flavor. The real substance is the Three-Sister medley. Ian Torres, an intern at the Heritage Garden at the University of Illinois Chicago, sums up the value of the Three Sisters to him:

[B]y themselves, these three plants will produce and will survive, but when they are together their potential is expanded and the chances of them producing, as well as the quantity and quality, are increased. Now, in our society we have been taught that in order to be productive and successful we have to live our lives through a model of individualism. We have this language and mindset of the individual. In reality this individual mentality in many occasions has crippled our nation, our businesses, our relations, our communities, and even our families. The truth is that we really need each other just like the corn, beans, and squash need each other.

Sources

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