

THE THREE SISTERS



The plants for the Centre Circle stone of the Medicine Wheel, honouring Mother Earth are corn, beans and squash, the staple foods known to many Native people as the three sisters. This is the way they got that name.

A long time ago, the people of the Eastern Woodlands, lived in abundance and in harmony with Mother Earth, and learned about life by watching, and listening for her voice.

There were three girls, who happened to be sisters, who never learned how to get along. They were always quarreling, disagreeing, arguing and criticizing each other. They had very few friends, but they did have relatives in another village, which was a morning's walk away. When they began to wish for conversation and the warmth of other humans, they would visit their relatives.

One day they started out toward the other village. Inevitably, it wasn't long before the girls began finding fault with each other.

The girls walked and fought most of the morning. An hour before they reached the village of their relatives, they became so loud and angry that the people of the village could hear them. "Oh, no" they moaned, "It's those three sisters. Why do they have to come here?"

In the village, an old woman came out of her lodge. She stood in front of her lodge waiting. The girls were very involved in their quarreling and they didn't notice the old woman until they were almost at her house. The old woman's stern look startled them.

The old grandmother took them into her lodge. "Look this way" she instructed as she led them to a window.

"Tell me what you see in the garden. Tell me how it is out there." urged the old woman.

"There's tall corn, Grandmother," said one of the girls. "It's roots are in the earth, but it's tassels reach high toward the sun and wind and it is growing good food for the people."

"And there are beans," said the second girl. "They are growing with the corn, and their vines wind around the tall corn stalks. I can't tell which plant is holding the other up, but the beans are also growing good food for the people."

"And the squashes are growing there too," said the third girl. "Their beautiful leaves shade the moist earth to keep the water in, and it helps the corn and beans to grow. And these vines are also growing good food for the people."

"You are right," the old grandmother said. "All three of you have told part of the truth but only when each of you have spoken, has the whole story been told. Like the three sisters growing in the garden, the corn, the beans and the squash, each of you has a gift for the people. Your gifts will not ripen to their fullness, though, unless you do as the plants do and help each other and grow together."

"And now" she said, "I have a gift for you. It is only one gift for the three of you, so you must learn to share, and you must not quarrel over this gift, for it is a reminder of the lesson you have learned today."

Out of a birch bark basket, the old woman drew a belt of wampum beads made of pure white shell.

"Take this belt with you now. Whenever you are together, or whenever people cannot find harmony with each other, it will give you strength to help them. You will not bicker with each other anymore, because every time you do, one of these beads will turn black and spoil the belt. When people see that even you three girls can learn to love and help each other, they will be inspired by your example."

That is the story of the three sisters!

Many people on this continent of Turtle Island still grow the three sisters together in their gardens, just as their ancestors did in ancient times.

Corn, beans and squash have tremendous culinary and nutritional value. They are the dietary staples of many cultures worldwide. Not only do these plants complement each other, when they grow but they also provide a complete balanced meal when eaten together.

It is a wise person who remembers the story of the three sisters and the bounty of the Earth Mother they represent.

