



Diné Lifeways & the Three Sisters

Grades K-8

Knowledge Holder

This lesson was created by Tynya Kee (Diné).



Materials

- Heirloom seeds – balance of corn, beans, and squash
- Planting containers, pots, or garden bed
- Soil and compost
- Watering cans
- Wooden planting sticks
- Hand trowels, small shovels
- Gloves
- Nature journals or sketchbooks
- Graph paper for designing
- Pencils and markers

Standards

This lesson aligns with national science, social studies, and health education frameworks by:

- Exploring how the Diné framework serves as a real-world model for community and environmental health.
- Analyzing the natural science of companion planting, including how different crops share nutrients and protect soil.

Objective

Through the story of the Three Sisters, students will see how traditional ecological knowledge gives us a practical guide for a balanced life. Students will discover how the core values of K'é (kinship) and the Diné four-step thinking process apply to both our human communities and our gardens, helping us practice real, everyday stewardship.

Survivance Message

In the Diné tradition, life is guided by a blueprint for harmony: *K'é dóó nitsáhákees dóó nahat'á náásgóó iiná bee siih hasingo ádoolníít*. This teaches us that through kinship (*K'é*), right thinking (*Nitsáhákees*), and intentional planning (*Nahat'á*), a resilient and balanced life (*liná*) is achieved moving forward into the future (*Siih Hasin*).

Across Turtle Island, Indigenous people have been growing the Three Sisters together in companion gardens for thousands of years: Corn, Beans, and Squash. Growing them together in a companion planting design helps them grow big and strong, leaning on one another to survive and thrive. This ancient system stands as a powerful living reminder of Indigenous ingenuity and sustainable land relationships.

The Scientific Harmony of the Sisters: When planted together, the Three Sisters take care of one another far better than modern industrial farming ever could. Corn grows tall first, standing as a living trellis for the beans to climb. The beans pull nutrients straight from the air to feed the soil, while the squash spreads its wide, prickly leaves along the ground as a living mulch. This shaded cover keeps the soil moist and cool, blocks weeds from growing, and deters pests with its sharp hairs.

Monoculture and Climate Vulnerability: Modern industrial farming does the opposite. It relies on monoculture, planting miles of just one crop all by itself. This drains the earth, dries out the soil, and leaves fields helpless against droughts and pests. By practicing polyculture (growing multiple crops together), Indigenous farmers protect the soil and build a food system that lasts.

The Garden as a Living Philosophy: The Three Sisters garden is a direct, visible demonstration of the Diné Four-Step Thinking Process used to solve problems, teach children, and live in harmony with the earth. These plants cannot thrive if they are isolated; they must practice K'é by leaning on one another, protecting the soil, and cooperating so the whole community can grow strong. Through this garden, students move beyond basic botany to experience the core pillars of this lifeway:

- **K'é (Kinship & Relationality):** The anchor of the entire philosophy. It means knowing your place in the world and treating family, community, plants, animals, and the land with deep respect, affection, and responsibility. This relationship is exactly why these crops are honored as "sisters" rather than treated as mere resources.



Diné Lifeways & the Three Sisters

Grades K-8

- Understanding how traditional ecological knowledge connects human choices directly with the natural world.
- Practicing hands-on soil and garden stewardship to support community food sovereignty.

Braiding Knowledge: Curriculum Standards

This lesson is part of a broader framework that weaves together the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) and Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge (ITECK). We teach Western science through a localized, relational lens to honor the history and sovereignty of the land and its caretakers. For a detailed breakdown of how this lesson aligns with specific NGSS benchmarks, ITECK guidelines, and UNESCO climate action goals, please visit our [story map](#).

Diné Bizaad (Navajo Language)

[Navajo Language Guide and Resources](#)

K'é (pron. K'eh): Relationality, kinship, being a good relative to all things

Nitsáhákees (pron. nit-sah-hah-kehs): Thinking, deep reflection

Nahat'á (pron. nah-hah-t'ah): Planning and organizing an intentional design based on thoughtful reflection.

liná (pron. ee-nah): Living, working, bringing plans into physical reality.

Siih Hasin (pron. seeh hah-sin): Reassurance, reflection, achieving long-term ecological balance.

Naadą́ą' (pron. nah-dahm): Corn, Maize.

- Nitsáhákees (Thinking / Mental Awareness): The process of generating an idea, brainstorming, and looking to ancestral wisdom to form a good intention before acting. In the garden, this is understanding why the sisters need each other.
- Nahat'á (Planning / Design): Taking that thought and organizing it into a physical plan such as mapping out the companion mound matrix, gathering tools, and selecting the right heirloom seeds.
- Náásgóó liná (Living / The Journey Forward): Implementing the plan and physically working hard to cultivate a good life, represented by pressing the seeds into the dirt and actively tending the living soil.
- Bee Siih Hasin (Reflection / Balance): Developing confidence, emotional resilience, and a deep understanding of what has been accomplished so you can maintain ecological and spiritual harmony into the future.

Activities

15 Min: Feel! Help students connect with the ancient history of these seeds through storytelling and reflection before getting their hands dirty.

"Before we put our hands into the soil, we are going to look at how ancient agricultural relationships outlast modern concrete infrastructure. Gather close as we watch a short video showing the incredible engineering hidden within Indigenous farming. As you watch, I want you to think about why Indigenous people have planted this way for thousands of years, and what would happen if we chose to isolate the sisters by planting only one of them by itself?"

- Media Tool: [When Ancient Wisdom Beats Modern Industry](#)
- Story Circle Reflection: Open a class discussion where students share their own family experiences with planting or agriculture, centering whatever teachings they have received at home. Ask students: Why do you think Indigenous people planted this way for so many years? What would happen if we only planted one of the sisters?
- "Meet the Sisters" Skit: To help K-3 students internalize the symbiotic relationship, have them act out the growth of the garden. One student stands tall and reaches high as the Corn, a second student gently wraps a ribbon around the corn's arms as the climbing Bean, and a third student sits at their feet spreading a green cloth wide as the protective Squash.

30 Min: Connect & Play! (Planting the Living Mound) Transition into Creator's Classroom to establish the physical companion garden.

"We are stepping outside to practice a tradition of reciprocity. We are using our planting sticks, trowels, and soil to build miniature mounds or prepare our shared garden beds."

English Vocabulary

Companion planting, maize, symbiotic, monoculture, polyculture, resilience, Turtle Island

Resources

[Three Sisters Planting Diagram](#)

[How to grow a Three Sisters Garden](#)

[Native Seeds/SEARCH](#)

[When Ancient Wisdom Beats Modern Industry](#)

[Seed Savers Exchange](#)

[Diné College Educational Philosophy](#)

[Three Sisters: Working with Nature](#)

Book: *Kanyen'kehà:ka: The Three Sisters* by Michelle Corneau

[Living Within Our Climate: Indigenous Peoples of Northern Arizona \(presentation created by Tynya Kee\)](#)

[The Indian Pueblo Cultural Center's Indigenous Wisdom Curriculum](#)

Diné Lifeways & the Three Sisters

Grades K-8

- Have students plant their corn, beans, and squash seeds together. Guide them to use wooden planting sticks labeled with a permanent marker to mark out their seeds. As they work, encourage them to feel the distinct texture of each seed relative and carefully water them using watering cans.

Reciprocity through Stewardship

Bring the class back together into a reflective circle to explore the deeper meaning of care, relationship, and community responsibility. *How do the Three Sisters work together to care for the soil? Why do you think these plants are referred to as 'sisters' instead of just crops or food? What is the deep cultural significance of Indigenous planting methods? How is Indigenous companion planting different from modern industrial agriculture?*

Reciprocity with the garden means checking in on our plant relatives daily. Students will commit to caring for their pots or shared beds through regular watering, monitoring for pests, and ensuring the squash leaves have room to shelter the soil floor.

Adaptations & Extensions

Discuss how the Three Sisters cropping system varies across different regions and Tribal communities:

- The Northeast & Woodlands (Haudenosaunee Confederacy): In the wetter, seasonal climates of the Northeast, the Haudenosaunee traditionally plant the Three Sisters in mounded hills of soil. Raising the dirt into individual mounds elevates the roots, preventing them from waterlogging during heavy rains.
- The Upper Midwest (Menominee, Ojibwe, and Ho-Chunk): In the Great Lakes and woodland regions, the Three Sisters matrix is frequently discussed as a vital mechanism for community nutrition, seed preservation, and modern climate resilience.
- The Arid Southwest (Diné, Hopi, and Pueblo Nations): In intense heat and water scarcity, Southwestern farmers often space the planting sites much wider apart across a field or utilize specialized dry-land farming techniques to catch running rainwater, ensuring every root system has access to moisture.
- The Fourth Sister: Some communities introduce a fourth relative such as Amaranth, Sunflowers, or Bee Balm to the sunny edge of the mound to draw away pests and invite native pollinators.