

Three Sisters Inspired Garden Instructions

Location

Choose an area that gets at least eight hours of sun a day. Each mound should be about three feet in diameter and ideally the mounds will be created about three or four feet apart. If you don't have that much room in your garden, you can create the mounds a little closer together.

Materials Needed

- Shovel to loosen and prepare garden soil and a hoe or hand tool to remove weeds.
- One cubic foot bag of composted manure if your soil is not very fertile (optional).
- Water and the ability to watering during dry times.
- Seed kit containing corn, bean, and squash seeds. Each kit has enough seeds to make two mounds.
 - 14 Calico popcorn (*zea mays*) open-pollinated, 105 days to maturity
 - 12 Scarlet runner bean (*Phaseolus coccineu*) open-pollinated, 70 days for snap beans; 95 days for shelled beans.
 - 6 Waltham butternut squash (*Cucurbita moschata*) open-pollinated, 100 days to maturity

April through May

Prepare the Ground or Container:

By the first week of May, prepare planting area. Remove any weeds and build two mounds of soil about 12 inches high and 3 feet in diameter. Popcorn responds well to nitrogen-rich soil; amend mounds with well-composted manure if desired.

Planting Popcorn:

Popcorn grows best in warm weather, with air and soil temperatures are around sixty degrees. About Memorial Day or the following week, soak pop corn seeds between 8 to 12 hours before planting. Soaking will help speed up germination.

Plant seven popcorn seeds about six inches apart in the middle of each mound. Optimal planting depth is 1.5 inches. Keep the mound moist as they germinate.

June through September

Planting beans and squash:

Mid-June, when popcorn is at least four inches high, plant the bean and squash seeds. Soak the bean seeds between 8 to 12 hours before planting. Plant six bean seeds per mound in a circle about 6 inches away from the corn. Optimal planting depth for the beans is 1.5 to 2 inches. The squash seeds do not need presoaking. Plant 3 squash seeds in the outer ring of the mound, about a foot away from the bean seeds. Optimal planting depth for the squash is ½ to 1 inch deep. Keep the mound moist as they germinate.

Thinning corn, beans and squash:

At the same time you plant the beans and squash seeds, thin extra corn seedlings down to three or four plants to give them all space to grow. Choose the corn seedlings that appear strongest and spaced at least 8 inches apart. Rather than pulling the extra seedlings out, use scissors to gently snip off the non-selected popcorn plants at ground level. You can leave the tops between the remaining popcorn seedlings where they will temporarily cover the soil and eventually break down into the soil. In late June or early July, thin bean plants to 3 or 4 well-spaced bean plants and choose the most vigorous squash seedling.

Tending the Garden:

Over the growing season, gently weed around them by hand or with a hoe if necessary. Weeds will compete with the popcorn for water and soil nutrients. Eventually the squash plant will cover the ground, shading out many kinds of weeds. The squash plants covering the ground will also help keep the soil moist. Water during weeks when less than 1 ½ inches of rain falls. Water requirements are most critical from tasseling to ear formation. Drought stress at these times will decrease yield and kernel quality and may delay harvest. When the bean plants are tall enough, gently help them wrap around the corn stalks if they don't do so on

their own.

Harvesting Beans:

As early as July, you may see green beans forming. For eating fresh, harvest beans when they are still young and tender, about 4 to 6 inches in length, but before the beans start to swell inside and the pods become tough. If you harvest regularly, you will encourage the plants to continue to produce flowers and more beans.

If you wait until late summer or early fall to harvest, allowing the beans grow to maturity and dry on the vines or inside in a warm, dry, well ventilated space, you can eat them as dried beans and save some to plant next year.

Harvesting Squash:

Starting butternut squash from seed in June, this type of winter squash will ripen in September through November. Harvest them when they are fully mature. The squash should be completely tan, with no green remaining. The skin should be flat in color, not shiny, and hard enough that you cannot pierce it with your fingernail. The vine should be brown and dry and the vines may have already died back. Butternut squash can be stored up to three months in dry, cool conditions.

Harvesting Popcorn:

Calico popcorn is both decorative and delicious. Allow the kernels to dry on the ears on the plant as long as possible. Start checking the ears in September. Popcorn is ready to harvest when the kernels are hard and the husks and shank are completely dry. After harvesting, remove the husks and hang the ears in a warm, dry, well-ventilated space. To tell when popcorn is ready to use, shell a few kernels and try to pop them every week. If the popped corn is “chewy” or has jagged popped kernels, the corn is still too wet and needs a longer time to dry. When the popcorn has finished drying, store the kernels in an airtight container in a cool place.