BEFORE YOU PLANT

Conduct a soil test, and prepare the garden site. Add compost or other materials such as peat moss or manure to the soil. This will improve the soil structure and add nutrients. If you have grown a green manure cover crop such as winter rye, turn it under two to three weeks before planting.

The Passamaquoddy people traditionally planted the three sisters and have fed the community. One added Wabanaski step is harvest alewives when running in the streams to bury in your compost to supply the new plants with much-needed nutrients. Due to the glacial till, which makes up most of the soil in the far Northeast, the added compost is essential to the plants’ well-being.

PLANTING

In late May, plant corn. It is best if the ground has warmed and is no longer cold and wet. Haudenosaunee tradition holds that planting begins when a dogwood’s leaves are the size of a squirrel’s ear.

- Soak corn seeds for several hours, but not more than eight hours, before planting. Soaked seed may dry out quickly, so keep the seeds well watered for the first week or two if the soil is not kept moist by rain showers.
- Prepare low hills that are 3 to 4 feet apart within and between the rows.
- Place five to seven corn seeds, evenly spaced to a depth of 1 to 1 1/2 inches.
- Cover with soil. Corn varieties such as dent, flint, and flour corns are especially suited to this system, while popcorn often does not get tall enough and may be overwhelmed by the beans and pumpkins. Following Haudenosaunee custom, plant the seeds with kind thoughts three days before the full moon.

POLLINATION

- If you hope to keep a variety pure—for example, an heirloom variety of corn—you will need to isolate the corn from other varieties. If isolation is not possible, you need to hand pollinate. This is a challenge, but it is fun to experiment to see what results you can get.
- To hand pollinate, place waxed paper lunch bags over the newly forming silks to keep unwanted pollen. When the plants are tasseled 2 inches out, remove the bags briefly and shake the desired pollen on the silks, then replace the bags. Your desired pollen may be that of the same variety.
- If you are experimenting with crosses, however, the pollen must come from another variety. You can use brown paper lunch bags to collect desired variety. Be sure to keep track of which plants you pollinate and compare them with those that have cross-pollinated.
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BEFORE YOU PLANT

After young corn plants come up, begin removing weeds. As you are weeding, gently mound or hill the soil around the young plants.

When the corn plants are about 6 inches high, pole beans and pumpkins can be planted around the corn plants. Plant non-hybrid varieties that are readily available yet "authentic" crops.

After thoroughly weeding, plant four or five bean seeds in each hill. Plant four or five pumpkin seeds in every seventh hill, placing them around the young corn plants. (Planting pumpkins in every hill would quickly overwhelm your site with viney growth)

Your plants will need water each week. If it does not rain at least an inch per week, the planting will need to be irrigated. If you are using presoaked seed, remember to water more frequently at first.

Most of the nitrogen converted by the beans will not be available to the corn and pumpkins the first year; the bean roots have to break down to release nitrogen. Corn is a heavy nitrogen feeder, so side-dressing with fertilizer is necessary to achieve satisfactory yields. You can use manure, compost, or commercial fertilizer.

HARVEST & STORAGE

- Harvest and store your corn, beans, and pumpkins with care. When the corn husks are dry, pick the ears and spread them out in a dry place. To prevent mold, do not store the ears when they are first harvested.

- If you plan to grind the corn, let it dry for several weeks. If you plan to save seed, choose seed from your most vigorous, uniform plants from the center of the ear.

- After you have shelled the kernels, keep them in a cool, dry place in covered containers or plastic bag. Following the Haudenosaunee tradition, do not let a single kernel go to waste!

- You can harvest your beans when they are green or after the pods have withered and dried. Pick pumpkins when their color changes.

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