

WHERE **SCIENCE****HISTORY****AND****ART** CONNECT

To: Raven Hill friends
From: Cheri
Date: July 27, 2024
Re: The Three Sisters

Thursday was an incredibly special day, as Mary Donner and Courtney Wilber from Ziibimijwang of Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians visited Raven Hill Discovery Center and shared the story of the Three Sisters with a group of children and adults. Corn, beans, and squash are called the "Three Sisters" because they are often planted together in traditional Native American agriculture. The technique is known as companion planting. These three crops complement each other and have been a vital part of the diet and culture of various Indigenous peoples for centuries. The oldest sister, corn, provides a natural support for the beans to climb, eliminating the need for poles. Beans fix nitrogen in the soil, benefiting all three plants and improving soil fertility. Squash spreads out along the ground, acting as a living mulch that helps retain soil moisture, suppress weeds, and deter pests with its prickly leaves. This planting technique highlights an understanding of ecological balance and sustainable farming practices, making the Three Sisters a symbol of community, cooperation & interdependence.

Generations



Last Thursday, Mary Donner and Courtney Wilber from Ziibimijwang shared their story of companion gardening and the Three Sisters—corn, beans and squash—with Raven Hill children and adults! Thank you, Mary and Courtney, for an absolutely amazing experience.

Companion planting



A variety of corn, beans and squash can be found in the Three Sisters gardens, as a part of an ongoing experiment of best practices here at Raven Hill.

The practice of cultivating the Three Sisters—corn, beans, and squash—dates back at least a thousand years in North America. Indigenous peoples began using this method long before European contact, with evidence suggesting that the practice may have originated around 1000 A.D. or earlier. The exact timeline varies among different Native American cultures and regions, as they adapted the Three Sisters method to their specific environmental conditions and agricultural needs.

The Oldest Sister



Corn is more than just a crop for the Hopi; it is a sacred symbol representing life, growth, and the interconnectedness of their community, spirituality, and environment.

*- hand constructed coil and scrape Hopi pot
-Potter unknown | Leach Collection*

In a couple of weeks, the corn plants are a few inches tall and have established themselves and then the bean seeds are planted around the corn stalks. The beans use the corn stalks to climb up. The beans also help by fixing nitrogen in the soil, benefiting all three crops.

The Youngest Sister



Squash is one of the earliest domesticated crops in the Americas, with evidence of its cultivation dating back to around 8,000 to 10,000 years.

*-Stoneware squash pot by Artist Val Cushing
- Leach Collection*

In the traditional planting of the Three Sisters, the crops were generally planted in a specific sequence rather than all at the same time. The order was designed to maximize the benefits of each plant's growth and the symbiotic relationships among them. The corn seeds were planted first, usually at the top of small mounds of soil. Corn was planted first, because it grows tall and provides a natural support structure for the beans to climb. Corn also takes the longest to mature and needs to establish itself as a sturdy plant before the beans are added.

The Middle Sister



Beans were first domesticated around 7,000 to 9,000 years ago and occurred independently in multiple regions, including modern-day Mexico and Central America and South America.

*-“Bean sprout” soapstone sculpture
-Sculptor unknown | Leach Collection*

Squash seeds are planted last, hence the youngest sister. They are placed around the base of the mound once the corn and beans have started to grow. The domestication of squash was like an ancient 'science experiment,' where early cultivators selectively bred plants for traits like size, taste, and ease of harvest. This careful selection of seed through the ages has given rise to the diverse varieties of squash that we enjoy today.

Raven Hill’s mission to connect science, history and the arts parallels the story of the Three Sisters. Just as the Three Sisters thrive together, so do the fields of science, history, and the arts when cultivated in harmony. Both embody a blending of scientific knowledge, historical tradition, and artistic expression. By incorporating the Three Sisters into some of the Center’s exhibits and programs, Raven Hill provides a rich learning experience that honors Indigenous wisdom and highlights the interconnectedness of natural and cultural systems.

Summer hours remain in effect. Between Memorial Day and Labor Day, the Center is open weekdays from 10am to 4pm daily, noon to 4pm on Saturdays and 2pm to 4pm on Sundays. Call 231.536.3369 or email info@miravenhill.org to make appointments for other times, including major holidays. Hope to see you here to visit!

Cheri

The Three Sisters



Vision statement: Ziibimijwang of Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians “returns the sacredness back to the land, through generational healing and empowerment of Anishinabek cultural lifeways that honor relationships with tribal food sustainability and sovereignty by establishing a legacy of economic vitality and inclusivity.”