

History Themed Garden Beds

Native American ‘Sisters’

Many students learn about “**The Three Sisters**” in Social Studies: beans, corn and squash. By planting beans, corn and squash in a school garden, you can connect to the past and witness the ecological benefits of **companion planting** (the practice of planting different crops very close together for their mutual benefit). Corn stalks provided a place where bean vines could climb into the sunlight while the bean’s roots fixed nitrogen in the soil to make it available for nitrogen-hungry corn and squash. Squash leaves also covered the soil to impede weed growth.

Additionally, the Abenaki people planted the “Seven Sisters.” These seven crops consist of corn, bean, squash, sunflower, Jerusalem artichoke, ground cherry and tobacco.

Consider growing varieties such as:

Corn:

Calais Flint (good for corn meal)
Gaspé’ Flint (miniature, fast-growing, good for corn meal)
Glass Gem (popping corn)
Tom Thumb (popping corn)

Sunflower:

Mongolian Giant
Titan

* With corn, you need to plant in blocks (not straight rows) for good pollination and full ears.

Bean:

Vermont True Cranberry
Marfax
Jacob’s Cattle
Calypso
Scarlet Runner

Squash:

East Montpelier
Boston Marrow
Long Island Cheese
Long Pie pumpkin

We have suggested heirloom varieties as they are historically connected to the region, however, growing heirlooms can be more difficult than conventional varieties. You can try any variety readily available to you, and consider growing several different varieties to compare growth rate and success (which can vary by garden space), appearance, and student preference.

Source: *The Seeds of Renewal Project: Renewing Abenaki Agriculture One Seed at a Time*. Fred Wiseman, Local Banquet, February 2015.

Colonial Garden Beds

Learn about the experience of the early settlers by growing what they grew. Early colonists, such as the Pilgrims, also grew the three sisters (corn, beans and squash), relying heavily on corn which was dried to make cornmeal. They also grew familiar crops from seeds they carried over from Europe. These included wheat, barley, oats and peas. In kitchen gardens (smaller and nearer the house) settlers would grow herbs and vegetables, like parsley, sage, cabbage, beets, lettuce, spinach, carrots and turnips.

Plants of Place

There are many crops associated with New England: beans (ideal for Boston Baked Beans), cranberries, pumpkins and other squash, apples, and blueberries. Consider having your students research their countries of heritage and selecting a crop from their history.

A Note about Perennials

Perennials (such as Jerusalem artichoke and ground cherry) and shrubs (such as blueberry and cranberry) can create anchors in your garden space that require less maintenance over the years. If you do decide to change your bed theme, many plants can easily be removed and relocated.

Founded in 1829, Massachusetts Horticultural Society is dedicated to encouraging the science and practice of horticulture and to developing the public's enjoyment, appreciation, and understanding of plants and the environment. Located in the historic Elm Bank Reservation, The Gardens at Elm Bank provides a place where people of all backgrounds can come together for inspiration and education.

Mass Hort's public gardens are a place of beauty, discovery, quiet reflection, and appreciation of garden design. Massachusetts Horticultural Society is a 501(c)(3) charitable organization. Please visit MassHort.org to learn more about its mission and educational programs including: the Mass Hort Plantmobile which visits schools and communities to engage youth in plant science; and Community Supported Horticulture programs which supports educators in using gardens as teaching spaces.

Source: *Growing Food*, Plimoth Plantation, 2018.