Name: _____ Class: _____

The Three Sisters

By Barbara Hagen
2005

Vegetables have been an important part of humans' diets for hundreds of years. In this informational text, Barbara Hagen discuss some of the vegetables that were most important to many American Indian diets. As you read, take notes on how American Indians grew and used three primary foods.

[1] How many times have your parents told you to eat your vegetables? Well, things haven't changed much in the last few hundred years. Kids who grew up before 1492 had to eat their vegetables, too. Three of these vegetables were so important that some American Indians called them "our supporters" or "the three sisters." Corn, beans, and squash were the main foods of many Indian tribes, from the Iroquois in the Northeast to the Navajo in the Southwest.

"Autumn Corn" by Bart Heird is licensed under CC0

Why were these three vegetables called the three sisters? Native people, such as the Iroquois who lived in what is now New York State, had a smart way to plant them. Corn was planted first. When the tiny corn shoots poked through the ground, it was time to plant the beans. As the corn grew, the bean vines climbed up the cornstalks. When the bean vines began to climb, it was time to plant the squash between the corn plants. As the squash plants grew, their leaves shaded the ground, keeping weeds out and keeping the soil cool and moist for the beans and corn. By sharing the land, the three sisters helped each other grow.

Corn, also known as maize, was the most important crop for many Native people. It was eaten in many ways, from corn on the cob to cornmeal[1] pancakes sweetened with maple syrup. Beans and squash rounded out the diets of people all over North America. Of course, vegetables were not the only food Indians ate. Depending on where they lived, they might have eaten buffalo meat, deer, rabbit, salmon, and shellfish. Wild berries were a welcome sweet treat.

Children helped their families get their food. Usually, girls worked with their mothers, planting and harvesting[2] crops or gathering wild nuts and berries. And boys worked with their fathers, making and using hunting and fishing tools: bows and arrows, traps, and fish hooks and nets.

[5] For many Native people, the three sisters were considered gifts from the Creator.[3] They were protected by Three Sister Spirits and were meant to be planted, eaten, and celebrated together.

1. flour ground with dried corn
2. **Harvest** ***(verb):*** to gather a crop
3. a god or spiritual force

"The Three Sisters" by Barbara Hagen, Appleseeds © by Carus Publishing Company. Reproduced with permission. All Cricket Media material is copyrighted by Carus Publishing Company, d/b/a Cricket Media, and/or various authors and illustrators. Any commercial use or distribution of material without permission is strictly prohibited. Please visit http://www.cricketmedia.com/info/licensing2 for licensing and http://www.cricketmedia.com for subscriptions.

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which sentence describes the main idea of the text?
    A. American Indians didn't get all the nutrients they needed from the three sisters.
    B. While some Native people ate only vegetables, others ate mostly meat and fruit.
    C. Many American Indians used to rely heavily on corn, beans, and squash for their diets.
    D. Without the three sisters, American Indians wouldn't have been able to live off the land.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
    A. "Corn, beans, and squash were the main foods of many Indian tribes, from the Iroquois in the Northeast to the Navajo in the Southwest." (Paragraph 1)
    B. "As the squash plants grew, their leaves shaded the ground, keeping weeds out and keeping the soil cool and moist for the beans and corn." (Paragraph 2)
    C. "Depending on where they lived, they might have eaten buffalo meat, deer, rabbit, salmon, and shellfish." (Paragraph 3)
    D. "Usually, girls worked with their mothers, planting and harvesting crops or gathering wild nuts and berries." (Paragraph 4)

3. What alternate title best expresses the main idea of the text?
    A. What American Indians Ate
    B. How American Indians Hunted
    C. American Indians' Favorite Foods
    D. Why You Should Eat Your Vegetables

4. According to the text, where did the idea to refer to the three vegetables as "the three sisters" come from?
    A. The vegetables are from the same vegetable family.
    B. The vegetables have similar physical traits.
    C. The vegetables were usually cared for by women.
    D. The vegetables grow closely together and help each other.

5. How does the text help readers understand the importance of the three sisters to the diets of many Native peoples?

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. In the text, the author discusses the three vegetables that American Indians relied on. What is a food that is important to your diet? How does it help your health?

2. In the text, the author explains the resourceful way many American Indians used the land to grow all three important crops together. What are some examples of other things working in partnership in nature? What are some examples of things or people working in partnership in your life?