

Indigenous and Culturally Significant Crops Guide

Toronto sits on the Dish With One Spoon Territory — traditional lands of the Haudenosaunee, Anishinaabe and Huron-Wendat peoples.

THE THREE SISTERS — Haudenosaunee Companion Planting System

Corn (O:nenhste), Beans (Ohsaheta), and Squash (Onon'onhsera) have been grown together on this land by Haudenosaunee peoples for at least 500 years.

In the traditional Kionhekwa garden: Corn provides tall stalks for beans to climb. Beans fix atmospheric nitrogen into the soil, feeding the corn and squash. Squash leaves shade the ground, retaining moisture and deterring weeds and pests.

Together they form a nutritionally complete food system: corn for carbohydrates, beans for protein and amino acids, squash for vitamins and minerals.

A 'Fourth Sister' — Bee Balm (Wild Bergamot) — was traditionally planted at garden edges to attract native pollinators and support the sisters.

Growing these seeds is an act of food sovereignty, cultural connection, and land stewardship. Seed-saving and sharing these varieties helps preserve living cultural heritage.

Crop	Role / Significance	When to Plant (Toronto)	Take	Growing Tips	Cultural Notes
Corn — O:nenhste ✦ (Flint / Flour varieties)	First Sister Structural support + staple grain	Direct sow May 24+ Soil ≥65°F / 18°C	10–15 seeds	Plant in 4×4 ft BLOCK for wind pollination (needs 10+ plants). Choose 70-day heirloom varieties for Toronto's season. Thin to strongest seedlings.	One of the most sacred foods in Haudenosaunee culture. Traditional varieties: Black Aztec, Bloody Butcher, Oaxacan Green. Seed-saving keeps these varieties alive.
Beans — Ohsaheta ✦ (Pole / Runner varieties)	Second Sister Nitrogen fixer + protein source	Direct sow 2–3 wks after corn (early to mid-June)	10–14 seeds	Plant 3–4 beans around base of each corn stalk once 6+ inches tall. Fixes nitrogen in soil, feeding all three sisters. Vines climb the stalks.	Beans and corn together provide complete protein — all essential amino acids. Traditional speckled/purple runner varieties most significant.
Squash — Onon'onhsera ✦ (Winter squash / Pumpkin)	Third Sister Living mulch + vitamins	Start indoors late Apr Outdoors May 24+	4–6 seeds	Plant between corn mounds. Large leaves shade soil, retain moisture, deter weeds. Hubbard, Delicata, and traditional pumpkin most authentic. Needs 4×4 ft.	Winter squash stores well through winter — essential for food security. Seeds are also edible and nutritious.
Sunflower ✦ (‘Fourth Sister’)	Garden guardian Pollinator attractor + edible seeds	Direct sow May–Jun Do NOT transplant	6–8 seeds	Plant at garden edges, not within the Three Sisters bed. Direct sow only — dislikes root disturbance. Choose tall heirloom varieties for edible seeds or dwarf for containers.	Sunflower seeds were an important food source. The Fourth Sister was planted to attract the pollinators the garden depends on.

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Bee Balm / Wild Bergamot ✦ (Oswego Tea)	Fourth Sister (alt.) Medicinal herb + pollinator plant	Start indoors 8–10 wks before last frost · or direct sow Apr	10–15 seeds	Plant at garden edges near Three Sisters bed. Spreads over time — give space. Blooms midsummer in red/pink/purple. Attracts hummingbirds, bees, butterflies.	Used medicinally by Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee peoples for colds and fever. Also called Wild Bergamot (<i>Monarda fistulosa</i>). Culturally significant across many Nations.
Amaranth ✦ (Grain + ornamental)	Ancient staple grain Edible leaves + seeds + ornamental	Direct sow after May 15 or start indoors 6–8 wks before	10–15 seeds	Grows 2–4 ft with stunning red/gold plumes. Harvest grain in fall when plumes dry. Young leaves edible like spinach. Drought tolerant once established.	Cultivated 8,000+ years by Aztec, Mayan, and Indigenous N. American peoples. Seeds are a complete protein. Was suppressed by colonizers — growing it is an act of cultural reclamation.
Coneflower — Echinacea ✦	Native medicinal perennial Pollinator support	Start indoors 6 wks before last frost · or direct sow May	10–15 seeds	Perennial — plant once and it blooms for years. Leave seedheads in fall for goldfinches. Divide clumps every 3–4 years. Blooms June– September.	Used medicinally across many Indigenous Nations for immune support and wound healing. Native to eastern and central North America. Supports monarchs and native bees.

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CULTURALLY SIGNIFICANT DIASPORA CROPS ★					
Okra ★	West African, Caribbean, South Asian cuisines	Start indoors late Mar Outdoors Jun 1+ (warm nights ≥60°F)	8–10 seeds	Soak seeds overnight. Needs full sun and warm nights. Use dwarf 'Cajun Delight' or 'Blondy' for containers (5+ gal). Use black plastic mulch to boost soil heat.	Originated in Africa. Enslaved Africans brought it to the Americas. Central to West African, Caribbean (callaloo), Creole (gumbo), South Asian (bhindi), and Ethiopian cuisines.
Bitter Melon ★	South Asian, SE Asian, East Asian cuisines	Nick seed coat + soak 24 hrs Start indoors late Apr · outdoors May 24+	4–6 seeds	Needs trellis, full sun, and the hottest stretch of Toronto's summer. Nick hard seed coat with nail file before soaking — dramatically improves germination.	Central to Indian (karela), Chinese (ku gua), Filipino (ampalaya), and Vietnamese cuisines. Valued for distinctive bitter flavour and medicinal properties.

Sources: Haudenosaunee Confederacy — haudenosauneeconfederacy.com · National Ag Library — na1.usda.gov (Three Sisters) · The Canadian Encyclopedia — thecanadianencyclopedia.ca · Pinnguaq — Haudenosaunee Kionhekwa Garden — pinnguaq.com · Old Farmer's Almanac — almanac.com