

From the community

By Bonnie Kohout and Barbara Sandy
(Photos by Barbara Sandy)

From the pages of the 2005 Old Farmer's Almanac, an Iroquois tribal legend was revealed, distinguishing three crops as highly compatible for cultivation – corn, beans and squash. Once Barbara Sandy, a Woods of King-Bruwaert resident in Burr Ridge, read the passage, she was motivated to plant the authentic **ThreeSisters Garden** in an effort to carry on this Native American tradition.

Mid-May, Sandy, who oversees the garden, and several neighborsplanted their spacious 40' by 50' Woods garden plot, starting with a circle of 6 corn seedlings, then surrounding each corn seedling with 4 pole beans, then planting squash and cucumbers in the spaces between the pole beans. In theory, the corn, beans and squash complement each other. Corn provides support for the pole beans, the beans put nitrogen into the soil, and the prickly leaves of the squash help to discourage predators, such as raccoons, from approaching the corn and beans. Sandy knows from previous Woods garden experience that raccoons can ravage corn crops on a consistent basis.

Within the expanse of the Three Sisters garden, Sandy and fellow Woods gardeners, Bernie Hester, Gayle Johnson, Sandi Sandy and Les Sandy, as well as Director of the Woods Barbara Schafer, also planted broccoli, orange and purple cauliflower, green and wax bush beans, tomatoes, carrots, beets, potatoes, peppers, watermelon, cantaloupe and sweet potatoes. They also cultivated a separate raised garden bed outside of the big garden consisting of five types of lettuce, rhubarb, asparagus, herbs, onions, pak choi and Swiss chard. Woods residents are encouraged each year to make suggestions as to what should be planted in the garden beds.

By natural instinct, gardeners brace themselves for all types of weather, and the Woods group was no exception as members coped well with summer's heavy rains that were followed by hot temperatures, then periods of drought. Regular watering from a spectacular sprinkler system installed by a King-Bruwaert maintenance crew and steady weeding kept the garden in good shape. Long time gardener and founding father of the Woods garden, Jack Foster, built a new fence around the raised garden, repaired one of the gates for the big garden, and also arranged for its composting and tilling.

As a result of this cooperative effort, the crops did flourish. Yet there were some disappointments. "The pole beans and the vines of the squash grew to be so heavy that they broke the corn (stalks) in half," Sandy said. "Strong winds also damaged the corn," she added. "We experienced a lower supply of corn because it couldn't pollinate. Due to the amount of space required for the Three Sisters garden, we were unable to plant as much squash and cucumbers as we usually do."

Perhaps the discovery of a rabbit's nest didn't help the cause of a more prolific garden. Mother rabbit was reported to have helped herself and her bunnies to a generous portion of the crops. Squirrels became more bothersome in the later months and the only insect nuisance proved to be Japanese beetles. It should be noted that the Woods garden is free of chemical fertilizer and insecticides. Chives, marigolds, zinnias and cosmos are planted outside of the fence to discourage the rabbits from entering the garden – (but no one told the rabbits).

All Woods residents are encouraged to visit the garden at any time to pick squash, tomatoes, lettuce or other vegetables to enhance their meals. Sandy chooses Wednesday as the day to pick and distribute garden produce to fellow Woods residents who request delivery. Once a week Les and Sandi Sandy deliver produce to Godair Park, an independent King-Bruwaert community located just a short distance from the main campus.

The Three Sisters garden proved to be a great learning experience for Sandy and the team of Woods gardeners as they made an earnest effort to recreate the planting strategies of the Native Americans. Like the early settlers learning how to maximize crop production, the group tried something new and recognized ways to make improvements for the next season. They also have at least one common bond with the plantings of the past – they produced an ample supply of fruits and vegetables to help sustain neighbors and friends with some healthy garden food.

