

We have had the privilege of listening to Erin Hayward, a Kanien'kéha (Mohawk language) speaking, third-generation, urban Indigenous person. The virtual **Table Talk**, entitled "Kayéthonenhste", focused on the role of a seed carrier or seed keeper, a role that Erin herself has taken on after she was gifted her first Indigenous variety of corn seed in 2015. Erin maintains seeds by growing them out and by keeping them viable for future generations. No easy feat.

During Erin's presentation, we learned about ways that First Nations people grow and process corn, as well as the history of oppression by the U.S./Canadian governments against Indigenous peoples, policies deliberately enacted to cause food insecurity/starvation, and cultural genocide.

Zea mays (ZEE-uh MAZE) is humanity's third most important cereal grain after wheat and rice. While there is but one species of corn, there are countless varieties (or types) due to corn's long history as an Indigenous food crop. In fact, the corn plant is thought to have originated between 55–70 million years ago in Central or South America. Indigenous peoples conducted controlled experiments over time to create different colours of kernels, flour corn (think tortillas), popcorn types, dent (cattle) corn which stores well, sweet corn, grandfather or pod corn, which grows well in our Northern climate, and many, many others.

A great winter food source, corn is jam packed full of starch, yet lacks many essential nutrients. To bring balance, Indigenous

peoples from all over Turtle Island (North America) grew beans and squash alongside (and often in and amongst) the towering corn plants.

While corn provides the structure for beans to flourish and climb along for support, like a good sister, beans do something amazing underground. Because of microscopic mycorrhizae, a type of fungus that associates with the roots of beans to fix nitrogen, this protein-rich plant helps the hungry corn plant to grow tall.

Where does squash factor in? This slow to start sister spreads along the ground right when the other sisters need a helping hand,

during the hottest days of summer. Squash shields the soil from the scorching sun, and crowds out competition. It's the perfect weed barrier. Not only this, squash is rich in beta-carotene and other vitamins not found in beans or corn. Together, the three sisters provide humans with a complete diet.

For more information and to see our **Table Talk**, Google "Let me plant corn" or visit <https://tinyurl.com/3ez68su2>

For more information about the synergistic relationship between corn, beans and squash, check out *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer: <https://tinyurl.com/muvbt7r9>

