



International Union of Soil Sciences

# The Milpa

Authors: Lisett Santa Cruz Ludwig, Rosalía Castelán Vega y J. Víctor Tamaríz Flores.

Benemérita University of Puebla, Mexico

Translation: Evelia Juárez Villegas.  
Latin American Soil Science Society



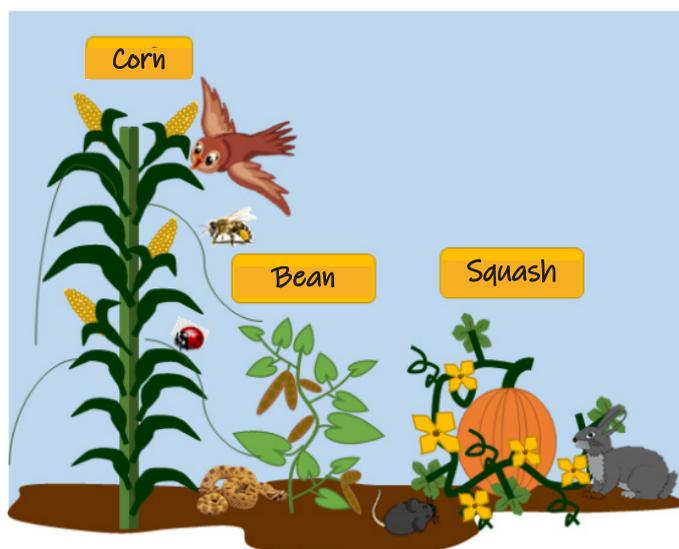
# The grandparents' milpa



Hello! I'm Tonantzin

And I come to share with you something that my *Huehue* (grandfather) taught me about "The Milpa".

The word *Milpa* comes from the Nahuatl word "milli", or "cultivated plot", and from "pan", which is translated as "on top." Meaning "what it is cultivated on top of the plot."



More than 500 years ago, we inherited this incredible cultivation system from our ancestors. It is a Mesoamerican agroecosystem, where three plants that are sisters live together: **corn** (*Zea mays*), **beans** (*Phaseolus spp*), and **squash** (*Cucurbita spp*).

They are also often accompanied by other plants, such as chili, tomato, chilacayote, quelites, and medicinal herbs. And by many animals to which it gives protection and food, from snakes to bacteria living in the soil.

Sister plants help each other:

The **corn** gives support to the bean that gets entangled and climbs on it. The **bean** is a friend of some bacteria from the soil called **Rhizobium** that catches the nitrogen of the air so that this one is used by the corn using some mushrooms called **mycorrhize**.

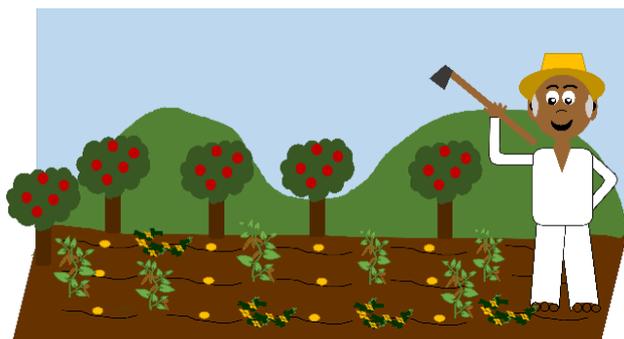


Oh! And the **squash** is protected from the sun with the shade of the corn, but what do you know? By expanding its creeping stalks, the squash helps to stop more plants from growing, as well as maintaining humidity and providing organic matter that is rich in nutrients.

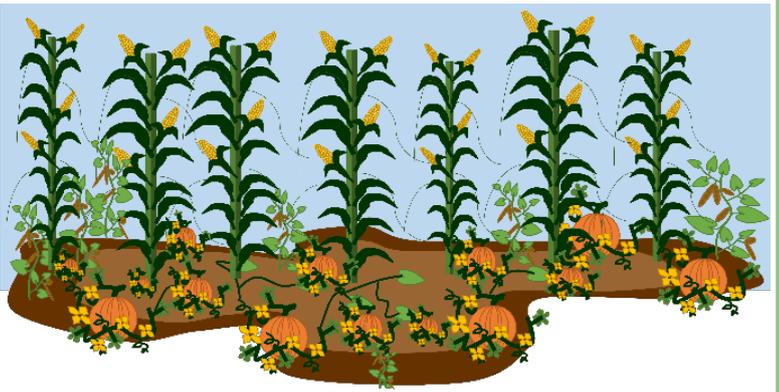


My Huehue likes to "make the milpd" a lot.

Before sowing "La milpd" various tasks must be carried out to prepare the land: fertilizing, plowing, and selecting the corn seeds to be used.



The sowing should be done between the temperatures of 15°C and 20°C and close to the rainy season since it requires a lot of humidity, or you can water daily to keep the soil humid.



The corn seeds are placed at a distance of one meter between them. And in the middle of the corn, seeds the beans, and the squash are sown.

During the growth of "The milpa", various tasks must be carried out, such as re-arranging the soil in furrows, fertilizing, and making sure that the plants grow straight; harvesting the different types of quelites, beans, and squashes; because they are all our food.



Sometimes a fungus (*Ustilago maydis*) called **Huitlacoche** in Mexico can grow on the cobs, which is delicious, and that is also consumed around the world as a gourmet product.

When the ear of corn is tender and soft at 100 or 150 days of growth, it

is time for the harvest of corn, which is an essential Mexican food.

As you can see, everything behind this millenary system of cultivation is quite captivating and fascinating!

*"The milpa"* is a prehispanic system that **contributes to recovering the environmental balance and the biodiversity of the soil.** It is part of the biocultural memory of thousands of peasant communities in Mesoamerica, and it constitutes a pillar of the food sovereignty of our peoples.

I love talking to my *Huehue*, because I learn many things, and because when he teaches me his knowledge, those of our ancestors are not lost; therefore I, Tonantzin, will continue doing what they teach me. And I will pass on everything I learn with him.

So, come...

**let's make The MILPA!**





International Union of Soil Sciences



**International  
Decade of Soils**  
2015-2024



Editor: Dr. Laura Bertha Reyes Sánchez

#TheSoilIsLife