

How to Create a Sensory Garden

Throughout history, special gardens have been created with engaging sights, sounds, smells, scents, and tastes. Sensory gardens are areas designed to stimulate one or more of the five senses: sight, smell, sound, taste, and touch. They entice a visitor to view plants at close range, to reach out and touch, to inhale a fragrance, to listen, and to actively experience the garden with all their senses.

Sensory gardens can be designed for spaces of all sizes, from small courtyards or borders, to containers. Garden “rooms” can be designed to stimulate one sense at a time or multiple senses simultaneously.

These multi-functional gardens can also be used for teaching, relaxing, and multiple therapies. Some sensory gardens are design specific. They can be created for children, people who are blind or have low vision, tactile or kinesthetic learners, and for therapeutic horticulture. Include raised beds and wider pathways in sensory gardens to allow them to be accessible to all.

Elements of a Sensory Garden

Sight: Adding visual interest to a sensory garden can be as simple as adding plants with different color blossoms and habits, like creeping, climbing, trailing, bushy, or upright. Try contrasting colors, textures, light, shadows, and forms. Incorporate plants that bloom at different times of the day or season. Differing leaf patterns, unusual bark, and stem colors also provide visual interest.

Smell: The strongest human sense also has the potential to trigger memories of special places or people. Some plants release scent naturally without the need for touch (roses), while others do not release a scent until they are rubbed or crushed (geranium). Sweet-smelling fragrance options are honeysuckle, gardenias, or peonies. Fragrant, savory scented thyme, rosemary, or oregano also test our recognition of herbs used in everyday products and recipes.

Sound: To stimulate the sense of sound, select flora that make noise when the wind blows through them, such as rattlesnake master, false indigo, bamboo, or ornamental grasses. Wind chimes can increase the variety of sounds. Bird feeders and



Lavender emits a very pleasing and calming smell and is an example of flora that would add scents to a sensory garden.



False indigo seed pods rattle in the wind, which makes this plant a good option for adding a sound element.

birdbaths draw the attention of feathered friends and their songs. Dry leaves on the ground or graveled walks add crunch when trod underfoot. Water features add an extra element of auditory stimuli.

Touch: Explore a variety of textures, including rough, smooth, fuzzy, and even sticky, by offering plant bark, foliage, flowers, seeds, and fruits. Select sturdy plants that will withstand frequent handling, as well as those with contrasting textures, including soft and fuzzy or rough and spiky. Some favorites are velvety rose petals the soft and silky wormwood, fuzzy Lamb's ear, the smooth, leathery surface of a southern magnolia, and the spiky rosette of sea holly. Smooth, fleshy succulent leaves offer a range of tactile experiences.

Taste: Add a variety of fruits, vegetables, and herbs to a sensory garden to explore tastes in the garden. Edible flowers, including nasturtium and pansy, also make tasty additions. Flavorful herbs to include in the garden are basil, chives, and lemon balm. Fruit could include strawberries, thornless blackberries, small fruit trees like blueberries, apples, and peaches. Clearly identify which plants are edible in the garden, and don't combine edibles with toxic plants.



Nasturtium is a delicious sensory garden flower that can be plucked and eaten.

Non-plant Elements

Sensory gardens often contain non-plant sensory opportunities.

Hardscapes: The different textures of hardscapes, such as large rocks, can be added to provide visual and tactile experiences.

Pathways: Corridors made of various materials, such as sand, woodchips, flagstone, or flat stepping stones, craft distinctive tactile and auditory experiences.

Signs: Since people-plant interaction is encouraged, interpretive signs are important.

Water: Flowing water features create additional sensory experiences through sight, sound, and touch.

Wildlife: Bird feeders invite feathered visitors to also enjoy the garden. These birds offer brilliant bursts of color to please the eye and bird songs that entice the visitor to identify the avian guest.

Authors

[Brittnay Haag](#), Horticulture Educator, University of Illinois Extension

Mary Fisher, Horticulture Educator (former), University of Illinois Extension



Bleeding heart's distinctively shaped blossom adds visual interest, a pop of color, and beauty to a sensory garden.



Lamb's ears have a soft, fuzzy texture that is very pleasing to touch and is a wonderful sensory garden addition.

Sensory Garden Plant Options

Just like with any garden, select plants that are hardy to your area and of various colors, heights, textures, and bloom times. When choosing plants, remember they need to be people-friendly. Do not use poisonous or allergenic plants. Avoid plants that require pesticides.

Select plants with contrasting forms and textures to create visual interest. Low mounds of satiny wormwood next to tall spires of flowers work well in terms of shape and texture. Brushing against plants spilling over the edge of a raised bed offers a tactile experience that can be enhanced by a fragrant plant choice like lavender.

Sight

Common Name	Scientific Name	Sensory Feature
Bleeding Hearts	<i>Dicentra spectabilis</i>	Heart-shaped flowers
Butterfly Weed	<i>Asclepias tuberosa</i>	Attracts butterflies
Cockscomb	<i>Celosia argentea</i>	Bright flowers
Pinks	<i>Dianthus hybrid</i>	Soft colors/scent
Zinnias	<i>Zinnia elegans</i>	Showy flowers/butterflies

Smell

Common Name	Scientific Name	Sensory Feature
Creeping Thyme	<i>Thymus serpyllum</i>	Scent
Catmint	<i>Nepeta mussinii</i>	Cats love this
Anise Hyssop	<i>Agastache foeniculum</i>	Licorice-like scent
Hyacinths	<i>Hyacinthus orientalis</i>	Sweet, strong scent flowers
Lily-of-the-valley	<i>Convallaria majalis</i>	Sweet scented flowers

Sound

Common Name	Scientific Name	Sensory Feature
Balloon Flower	<i>Platycodon grandiflorus</i>	Popping sound when squeezed
False Indigo	<i>Baptisia australis</i>	Rattling seed pods
Pigsqueak	<i>Bergenia purpurascens</i>	Foliage squeaks when rubbed
Switchgrass	<i>Panicum virgatum</i>	Sound of wind through leaves

Taste

Common Name	Scientific Name	Sensory Feature
Chives	<i>Allium schoenoprasum</i>	Mild onion-like flavor
Nasturtium	<i>Tropaeolum majus</i>	Peppery flavor
Mint	<i>Mentha spp.</i>	Peppermint or spearmint

Touch

Common Name	Scientific Name	Sensory Feature
Lamb's Ear	<i>Stachys byzantina</i>	Soft, furry foliage
Satiny Wormwood	<i>Artemisia schmidtiana</i>	Fine, silky foliage
Wooly Thyme	<i>Thymus pseudolanuginosus</i>	Fine, soft hairs on leaves

Modified November 2024