

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, the visually impaired, tactile or kinesthetic learners, and for therapeutic horticulture. Including raised beds and wider pathways allow sensory gardens 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, busy or upright. Try contrasting color, texture, light, shadow, 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 fragrances 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.



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 make this plant a good option for adding a sound element.

Sound: To stimulate the sense of sound, select flora that make noise when the wind blows through them, such as rattlesnake master, false indigo, bamboos, or ornamental grasses. Wind chimes can increase the variety of sounds. Bird feeders and 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: A variety of textures to explore, including rough, smooth, fuzzy, and even sticky should be offered through 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: A variety of fruits, vegetables, and herbs can be added 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 to name a few. Clearly identify which plants are edible in the garden, and don't combine edibles with toxic plants.



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

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 steppingstones 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 to entice the visitor to identify the avian guest.

Sensory garden plant options

Just like with any garden, select plants that are hardy to your area, and of various color, height, 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.

Authors

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Sense	Common Name	Scientific Name	Why?
Sight	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	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	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	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	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



Bleeding hearts 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 addition to your sensory garden.

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