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.
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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.

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.

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Nasturtium is a delicious edible flower that can be plucked and eaten in a sensory garden.
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**Sense** | **Common Name** | **Scientific Name** | **Why?**
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**Sight** | Bleeding Hearts | *Dicentra spectabilis* | Heart-shaped flowers
| Butterfly Weed | *Asclepias tuberosa* | Attracts butterflies
| Cockscomb | *Celosia argentea* | Bright flowers
| Pinks | *Dianthus hybrid* | Soft colors/scent
| Zinnias | *Zinnia elegans* | Showy flowers/butterflies
**Smell** | Creeping Thyme | *Thymus serpyllum* | Scent
| Catmint | *Nepeta mussinii* | Cats love this
| Anise Hyssop | *Agastache foeniculum* | Licorice-like scent
| Hyacinths | *Hyacinthus orientalis* | Sweet, strong scent flowers
| Lily-of-the-valley | *Convallaria majalis* | Sweet scented flowers
**Sound** | Balloon Flower | *Platycodon grandiflorus* | Popping sound when squeezed
| False Indigo | *Baptisia australis* | Rattling seed pods
| Pigsqueak | *Bergenia purpurascens* | Foliage squeaks when rubbed
| Switchgrass | *Panicum virgatum* | Sound of wind through leaves
**Taste** | Chives | *Allium schoenoprasum* | Mild onion-like flavor
| Nasturtium | *Tropaeolum majus* | Peppery flavor
| Mint | *Mentha spp.* | Peppermint or spearmint
**Touch** | Lamb's Ear | *Stachys byzantina* | Soft, furry foliage
| Satiny Wormwood | *Artemisia schmidtiana* | Fine, silky foliage
| Wooly Thyme | *Thymus pseudolanuginosus* | 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.