
Gardens for the senses

Summary

- Most gardens offer visual appeal, but a sensory garden is one that is designed to stimulate other senses as well.
 - Think about the people who will use the garden and take their ages and abilities into account with your design and plantings.
 - If anyone in your family suffers from hay fever or asthma, choose plants that are pollinated by birds or insects rather than plants that release their seeds into the air.
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Time spent in natural environments can provide a range of health benefits, including reduced stress and lowered blood pressure. Most gardens offer visual appeal, but a sensory garden is designed to stimulate all five senses. It's not hard to transform your own backyard into a sensory delight for people of all ages.

Sensory gardens also have proven therapeutic value. For example, people with disabilities (such as visual impairment or dementia) can enjoy nature in a safe and tactile environment. Sensory gardens can also make a great contribution to emotional and physical health. They can be beautiful places to relax, reflect, meditate, contemplate and talk.

Designing a garden for the senses

Your sensory garden should be designed to be interactive and accessible. Suggestions include:

- Think about the people who will use the garden and take their ages and abilities into account when drawing up your design. For example, raised garden beds and hanging baskets are easier for the elderly to manage than garden beds at ground level.
- Provide appropriate seating in the garden. For example, arm rests are essential for elderly users. Seats should also have adequate space around them so wheelchairs can fit alongside.
- Create walkways that wind through the garden – this is more attractive than straight paths and invites the visitor to slow down and look around. Interesting walkways that start and finish at the same point are ideal for people with dementia.
- Use the produce from your garden in craft activities. For example, you could pick and arrange flowers in vases or pluck scented petals and make your own potpourri.
- Appeal to young children by including a sandpit in a shaded area. Bright flowers, herbs, fruit and vegetables to collect will also encourage children to play in the garden, as will climbing trees and safe 'secret spaces'.

Looking at a garden for the senses

Colours, shapes and special features can help to create a wonderful visual environment. Suggestions include:

- Plant flowers of varying colours. Take the time of day and the seasons into account. For example, white flowers look almost luminous in low light conditions. Plant bulbs for plenty of colour during the winter months.
 - Include plant varieties with red, soft grey and mixed colour foliage.
 - Make use of contrast. For example, you could group together plants of different shapes, sizes and colours.
 - Clip or prune plants such as conifers (cypresses and pines) into interesting shapes.
 - Consider planting long grasses, strap-leaved plants and 'weeping' tree varieties – it's restful to watch and listen to plants moving in the breeze.
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- Install a water feature. Include bright varieties of fish and water plants in ponds, with a bench nearby. (You should install a mesh screen just below the surface of the water to protect young children and to discourage birds and cats from taking the fish.) If a sunken pond is not possible, a raised birdbath or other water feature works well.
- Include plants that appeal to birds and butterflies, such as bottle brush, lavender and hebe varieties. Ask your local nursery for advice.
- Use trees and plants to hide visually unappealing areas.
- Choose trees that attract bird life (you can include a bird feeder on one of the branches) and trees that change their colour in autumn.
- Consider the view from inside the house, and include interesting plant and flower displays outside windows.
- Be creative and use items such as old shoes, a wheelbarrow or car tyres to plant in.

Sound in a garden for the senses

Birds, wind chimes, crunching gravel, moving water and wind whistling through leaves bring a variety of sounds to the garden. These sounds can disguise background noises such as traffic. Suggestions include:

- Include nectar-producing plants that lure birds into your garden. A garden 'singing' with birds is an inviting place to visit.
- Encourage birds into your garden with a birdbath. (Make sure the bath is 'cat-proof'.)
- Hang wind chimes in breezy areas.
- Install a water feature. The sound of running water is relaxing.
- Plant grasses that rustle against each other in the breeze.
- Choose textured paths that make sounds as you walk on them, such as crushed gravel. For people with sight impairment, incorporating a different texture underfoot by the gate or front door will help them to recognise where they are in the garden.

Touch a garden for the senses

Gardens can be full of delightful things to touch and feel. Suggestions include:

- Incorporate plants with different textures such as large fleshy leaves, velvety or furry leaves, as well as feathery ferns.
- Vary the textures in your garden. For example, if you have smooth pebbles surrounding a water feature in one place, you could install lichen-covered rocks in another.
- Choose hardy varieties of plants that can cope with handling. Place delicate flowers and plants in hard-to-reach places.
- Include different types of surfaces along your walkways – for example, tiles, crushed gravel and stone slabs.
- Place plants and trees close to paths so that anyone walking along them is brushed by foliage.
- Provide sunny and shady areas to offer temperature contrast.
- Place prickly or thorny plants such as roses well away from paths and sitting areas. You may prefer not to include plants with thorns or spikes in your sensory garden.
- The bark of trees can also provide a tactile experience.

Smell a garden for the senses

Crushing fresh herbs in your hands or walking under a flowering jasmine arch can delight the senses and trigger memories. Suggestions include:

- Plant flowers with subtle smells such as violets.
- Plant aromatic, non-slip creepers or herbs such as mint, thyme or rosemary, near path edges or seats, so that when you walk on them they release a beautiful aroma.
- Space scented flowers at intervals around your garden so that the different scents will not be confusing or overwhelming.

Taste in a garden for the senses

Try tasting a home-grown tomato or discover the delights of having fresh herbs outside your back door. Suggestions include:

- Grow your own herbs and use them in your cooking.
- Plant a vegetable garden.
- Plant small fruit trees in your garden, if space is limited.
- Use large pots for fruit trees, bay trees and nut trees if you don't have space in your garden.
- Plant species with edible flowers such as nasturtiums and violets, and use them in salads or desserts.

Gardens for the senses you can visit

If you do not have a garden of your own, or if you're looking for inspiration, there are many gardens and parks that are open to the public for all to enjoy. Examples include:

- The Royal Botanic Gardens, Melbourne (sensory gardens include the Grey Garden, the Herb Garden and the Children's Garden)
- The Royal Botanic Gardens, Cranbourne
- Mambourin Sensory Garden, Werribee
- Bob Pettitt Reserve Playground and Sensory Garden, Jan Juc
- Gardens open via Open Garden Australia
- National Trust properties such as Rippon Lea House and Gardens, and Heronswood
- Heide Museum of Modern Art
- Werribee Park.

Where to get help

- Garden nurseries
- Horticultural Therapy Association of Victoria Tel. (03) 9836 1128

Things to remember

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