



Horticultural Therapy Association of Victoria

Gardens for the Senses

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.

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. This article offers a range of suggestions on how to transform your own backyard into a sensory delight.

Interactivity

Your sensory garden should be designed to encourage interactivity. 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 sitting, standing and climbing areas, for example, benches, logs, platforms, bridges, and low-hanging tree branches.
- Create walkways that meander through the garden – this is more attractive than straight paths, and invite the visitor to slow down and look around. Interesting walkways that start and finish at the same point are ideal for people with dementia.
- Appeal to young children by including a sandpit (in a shaded area). Swings and a slide also encourage children to play in the backyard.
- 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 pot pourri.
- Involve children in making a scarecrow for your vegetable plot.
- Sensory gardens also make beautiful places for timeout, reflection, meditation, contemplation, discussion which can only help with our emotional and physical wellbeing.

Sight

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

- Plant flowers of varying colours. Take 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 red-leafed, soft grey foliated and variegated plant varieties.
- Make use of contrast, for example, you could cluster together plants of different shapes, sizes and colours.
- Clip or prune certain plants (such as conifers) 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.
- Install a pond. Include bright varieties of fish and water plants, and 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 bird bath or other water feature always work well.
- Include plants that appeal to butterflies, such as English lavender and hebes.
- Use trees and plants to screen visually unappealing areas. Consider also choosing trees that attract bird life (you can include a bird feeder on one of the branches) and trees that change their foliage in Autumn.
- Consider the view from inside the house, and include interesting plant and flower displays outside windows.
- Pot plants don't have to be confined to traditional pots. Be creative and use items such as old shoes, a wheelbarrow or car tyres.

Hearing

Birds, wind chimes, crunching gravel and wind whistling through leaves can create their own musical magic.

Suggestions include:

- Include nectar-producing plants that lure birds into your garden. A garden with birds singing is an inviting place to visit.
- Encourages birds into your garden with a birdbath. However, make sure the bath is 'cat-proof'.
- Hang wind chimes in breezy areas.
- Install a water feature. The sound of running water is relaxing.
- Choose textured paths that make sounds as you walk on them, for example, crushed gravel. For people with sight impairment, incorporating a different texture underfoot by the gate or front door will assist them in recognising where they are in the garden.

Touch

Soft lichens, lying like tempting cushions over rocks, large fleshy leaves that beg to be held – gardens can be full of delightful things to touch and feel. Suggestions include:

- Vary the textures in your garden. For example, if you have smooth pebbles surrounding a water feature in one place, you could install rough lichen-covered rocks in another.
- Choose hardy 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 walkways, so that anyone ambling along the paths is brushed by foliage.
- Don't lop low-hanging tree branches unless they are a safety hazard. Swinging and climbing are fun experiences.
- Provide sunny and shady areas to offer temperature contrast.
- Place prickly 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.

Smell

You may not want to plant a chamomile lawn but crushing fresh herbs in your hands or walking under a flowering jasmine arch at nightfall can hold their own against the most expensive perfumes for delightful smell sensations. Suggestions:

- Consider planting flowers with subtle smells that require you to stick your nose into the petals, such as violets. Flowers that release their scent into the air are not the only option.
- Consider planting a non slip creeper / herb near the path edges so that when you walk on the plant it will release a beautiful aroma – ie. penny royal
- Don't clump too many aromatic plants in the one area, as the confusion of different scents will be overwhelming. Space scented flowers at intervals around your garden.
- Plants herbs, many are very aromatic but they only release their scent when the leaves are rubbed or crushed.
- Choose plants that are pollinated by birds or insects rather than plants that release their seeds into the air, if anyone in your household suffers from hay fever or asthma, generally, native Aust. plants are less troublesome.
- Use mulch materials like wood shavings, or some types of bark. These can also smell good.

Taste

Once you've tasted a homegrown tomato, or discovered the delights of having fresh herbs outside your backdoor, you'll never look back. Suggestions include:

- Grow your own herbs and use them in your cooking.
- Plant a vegetable garden.
- Use large pots for fruit trees, bay trees and nut trees if you don't have space in your garden.
- Consider buying small fruit trees for your garden.
- Point out to small children that not all plants are safe to eat. Supervise children when they harvest herbs, fruits and vegetables from the backyard.
- Use the petals from certain flowers in salads, for example, nasturtiums and violets.

Where to get help

- Garden nurseries
- For enjoyment and inspiration, visit sensory gardens open to the public, such as the Royal Botanic Gardens in South Yarra (sensory gardens include the Herb Garden and the Grey Garden) Tel. (03) 9252 2300

Things to remember

- Most gardens offer visual appeal, but a sensory garden is one that is designed to stimulate all five senses.
- Think about the people who will use the garden, and take their ages and abilities into account when you draw up your design.
- If anyone in your family suffers from hay fever or asthma, be sure to choose plants that are pollinated by birds or insects rather than plants that release their seeds into the air.

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