



Gardens for the Senses

Time spent in natural environments can provide a range of health benefits. 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. Read on for 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:

- Who is going to use the garden? Take their ages and abilities into account designing your garden. E.g. raised garden beds and hanging baskets are easier for the elderly and wheelchair gardeners to manage than garden beds at ground level.
- Provide sitting and standing areas, e.g. benches, logs, platforms and bridges.
- Create walkways that meander through the garden – this is more attractive than straight paths, and invite the visitor to slow down and look around. Walkways that start and finish at the same point are ideal for people with dementia.
- Sensory gardens also make beautiful places for timeout, reflection, meditation, contemplation, discussion which can only help with our emotional and physical wellbeing
- Appeal to young children by including a sandpit (in a shaded area) and play equipment
- Use the produce from your garden in craft activities.
- Involve children in making a scarecrow for your vegetable plot.

Sight

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

- Plant flowers of varying colours. Consider planting bulbs for winter / spring colour
- Include red-leafed, soft grey foliaged and variegated plant varieties.
- Make use of contrast, e.g. 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, consider a raised bird bath or other water feature..
- Include plants that appeal to butterflies, such as English lavender and hebes.
- Use trees and plants to screen 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 foliage in Autumn.
- Consider the view from inside the house, include interesting plant and flower displays outside windows.



Hearing

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

- Nectar-producing plants that lure birds into your garden.
- Encourage birds into your garden with a birdbath and / or feeders.
- Install a water feature. The sound of running water is relaxing.
- Hang wind chimes in breezy areas
- Choose textured paths that make sounds as you walk on them, For people with sight impairment, a different texture underfoot will assist them in recognising where they are.

Touch

- 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.
- Include different surfaces along your walkways, e.g. tiles, crushed gravel and stone slabs.
- Place plants and trees close to walkways, so that anyone ambling along the paths is brushed by foliage but won't trip.
- 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 are wonderful sensory experiences.

- 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.

Taste

Once you've tasted a homegrown tomato, or discovered having fresh herbs outside your backdoor, you'll never look back. 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
- Advise adults and children that not all plants are safe to eat. Supervise children when they harvest herbs, fruits and vegetables.
- Use the petals from certain flowers in salads, for example, nasturtiums and violets.

Where to get help

- Garden nurseries
- Sensory gardens open to the public include the Royal Botanic Gardens in South Yarra (sensory gardens include the Herb Garden, the Grey Garden & Ian Potter Foundation Children's Garden) Tel. (03) 9252 2300

Most gardens offer visual appeal, but a sensory garden is one that is designed to stimulate all five senses.