

Sensory Gardens (published 2025-09-06)

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Sensory gardens are used in many ways to encourage interaction and appreciation of nature for special populations or the public in general. The idea is to provide enjoyment through touch, smell, color, sound and/or taste with plants. These gardens can be designed for a specific sense or embrace all of them depending on the purpose behind them.

We can engage our senses in our own gardens, too, with clever selection and placement of plants, flowers, vegetables, fruit or berries. The key is careful consideration of how you and your family members interact with your gardens whether it is a small space or a wide-open area.

Sight seems obvious because we plant things we like to look at. Color combinations and contrasting colors can make a huge difference in how you see your flower gardens. Colors that bring energy to the garden are red, orange, and yellow. More peaceful, calming colors are blue, white and purple. And it's not just flowers you can enjoy. Watching butterflies flit from plant to plant is incredibly enjoyable. So, pollinator-friendly plants, not just colors you like make great choices. Foliage also adds visual interest with variegated leaved, different textures, size and shape. Architectural elements like gazing globes, fountains, unique planters and mirrors can spice up the visual experience. Consider adding ornamental grasses that sway in the breeze. And plan for flowers that bloom at different times to attract attention throughout the seasons.

Hearing might not be the most obvious sense we think of when planning a garden. But there are many ways to involve sound. Water features engage hearing as well as sight. The sound of water bubbling in a fountain and spilling over into a basin can be very relaxing. Wind chimes can be music to your ears. Wind stirring grasses and tree leaves, that gentle rustling sound, paired with the sight of the movement can be quite relaxing. The birds chirping while enjoying treats in a birdfeeder or from a plant that produces berries can make anyone smile. There are also plants that form seed pods that make a rattling sound like false indigo (*Baptisia* sp.).

There are many ways to provide pleasant aromas in the garden that will make you inhale deeply. Roses are obvious choices, as well as lavender and peonies. Other plants include herbs like rosemary, sage, mints, oregano and basil. Lilacs and flowering fruit trees are great if you have the space. The native witch hazel tree (*Hamamelis virginiana*) has fragrant flowers in late winter and provides beautiful fall color. Honeysuckle is quite sweet-smelling and the native plant *Diervilla sessilifolia* is a bush rather than a vine. It is a good fit for a garden area, especially if you have a slope or area you want to fill in as it will form a thicket by suckers but is not considered invasive.

One of the plants I think of for touch is the rose. The soft petals feel like velvet. Lamb's ear also provides that fuzzy texture that makes you keep stroking it. Ferns have a lovely texture that makes me think of lace. Magnolia (*Magnolia virginiana*) leaves provide a nice contrast with their leathery texture. Succulents like aloe vera and moss rose, an annual plant, are smooth and fleshy. Plant the aloe vera in a pot so you can keep it indoors during cold weather. Another annual to consider is the chenille plant (*Acalypha hispida*). Its long fuzzy flower is unique looking and fun to touch.

As for taste, herbs are clear choices for tastebud wakeups. How about having strawberry plants in a planter or running freely throughout the garden. I love the idea of plucking a fresh, ripe berry right from my garden. Nasturtiums and pansies are edible flowers to include. If you have fruit trees, pluck an apple or peach right off the tree for a perfect snack. Tomatoes fresh off the vine are divine! Sprinkle other vegetables in your edible section for variety. Swiss chard, lettuce and parsley would be welcome snacks while enjoying your garden. Be sure that the edible plants are identified as such and make sure no toxic/poisonous plants are in your sensory garden.

Resources included below provide many more ideas and suggestions for creating your own sensory wonderland.

Resources

“Creating a Sensory Garden,” <https://extension.psu.edu/creating-a-sensory-garden>

“How to Create a Sensory Garden,” <https://extension.illinois.edu/sites/default/files/2024-12/Sensory%20Garden.pdf>

“Sensory Gardens,” <https://ocean.njaes.rutgers.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Sensory-Garden-handout.pdf>

“Pollinator Gardens Design Guide,” <https://www.nrcs.usda.gov/sites/default/files/2022-09/PollinatorGardens.pdf>

“Guide to Exceptional Tennessee Pollinator Plants,” <https://tnpollinators.wpengine.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Guide-to-Exceptional-Tennessee-Pollinator-Plants.pdf>

“Tennessee Smart Yards – Ferns,” <https://tnyards.utk.edu/category/native-plants/ferns/>

“Ornamental Grasses in the Home Landscape,” <https://extensiongardener.ces.ncsu.edu/2024/04/ornamental-grasses-in-the-home-landscape/>

“Birdfeeders and Wildlife,” <https://vet.tufts.edu/tufts-wildlife-clinic/resource-library/birdfeeders-and-wildlife>

“Backyard Feeding Basics,” <https://extension.wvu.edu/natural-resources/wildlife/birds/backyard-feeding-basics>

For more information about gardening, visit UTHORT’s YouTube site for helpful videos: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjS3d1IkIH1OZ1Z2qPvhgfQ>

Or Washington County’s YouTube site: <https://www.youtube.com/@utextensionwashingtoncounty>

How do I ask a question?

If you have a question for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at www.netmga.net. Click the link at the top of the page, "ASK A MASTER GARDENER" to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.