

Accessible Gardening: Sensory Design

What is Sensory Design?

Sensory design is a way for people to enjoy or experience a garden through their five senses. It is common for designs to use different parts of the garden to highlight each sense. For example, one part of a sensory designed garden might focus on the sense of smell. This part may have plants that have strong fragrances, like lavender and lilac. Another part might focus on taste and be planted with herbs and edible flowers, like basil, dandelions and honeysuckle.

Sensory design is a way to make your garden accessible. Everyone can enjoy your garden because it brings sensory experiences to your visitors. Visitors may not be able to enjoy your garden otherwise.

Sensory designed gardens can also include things that stretch and test people's abilities. For example, the surface of a walkway can be made of textures that are more challenging for a person to walk on.



 **GreenThumbs**
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Design Considerations



Sensory gardens are used to encourage people to explore, touch, smell, taste, pick, and crush plants. Keep in mind that plants you use should be able

to stand damage from being touched.

The goal of sensory design is to bring out the parts of the garden that can be experienced by visitors through their senses. Below are a few tips.

- Plants that you would like visitors to explore should be planted near the path. For example, plant a tree near the path so people can feel its bark. This is different from traditional planting designs that put trees in the background.
- Plant plants at various heights to add more depth.
- Use different materials to help people see where they should and should not walk. Crushed stone, bricks, pavers, pieces of lumber, or fencing can be used as edge guides to mark where areas begin and end. Stone, gravel, brick and slate can be used to mark walkways.
- Design walkways to be a figure eight, a sundial, or overlapping circles. This gets rid of dead-ends, which can cause confusion for people with cognitive disabilities, dementia and Alzheimer's disease.
- Border your garden with an attractive fence. This keeps people from wondering off, without anyone feeling confined or singled-out.

Designs that focus on different senses

To bring out the sense of taste:

- There's no better way to explore taste than eating fresh from the garden! Fruits and vegetables are not the only edible things found in the garden. Edible plants vary in taste. For sweet tastes, try planting honeysuckle, carnations and berries. You may want to plant clover, garden sorrel, and begonias to add sour tasting plants to your garden. To have bitter tasting plants, try English daisies, marigolds and acorns. To add a tangy flavor for visitors, plant dill and chrysanthemums.
- Herbs are commonly used in cooking to add taste. Many can be eaten fresh such as basil, parsley and chives.
- Try non-traditional edible plants like marigolds, dandelion flowers and nasturtium flowers.



To focus on the sense of sight:

- Color can set the mood and atmosphere of your garden. Plants with bright colored leaves and flowers give an energetic feel. Plants with subtle coloring, like trees and mosses, give a calmer feel.
- Some fruits and vegetables are very different in color when they are ripe compared to the plants on which they grow. An example of this is purple pod bush beans.
- Leaves, fruits, flowers and stems are great for exploring shapes.
- Trees, grasses, and water can show movement. Butterfly bushes are a great way to attract butterflies and show off motion. Place mobiles, chimes and moving sculptures where people can set them in motion.



To focus on the sense of smell:

- Scented plants are the most popular examples for exploring smell. Different plants give off smell in different ways:
 - Some plants give off their smell without having to be touched, like lilac.
 - Some plants, like violets and primrose, have subtle smells. This can be used to draw visitors in to take a closer look at a plant.
 - Some plants release their smell only after they have been touched or crushed, like herbs.
- Place plants along walkways so they give off their scent when brushed against by people passing them. Examples include lavender, lemon balm and mint scented geranium.
- The scents plants give off can trigger different feelings or moods for visitors.
 - Lavender and rosemary are considered refreshing scents.
 - Honeysuckle and wisteria are known to be calming scents.
 - Tomatoes, citrus, herbs and spices have strong scents.



To show the sense of touch:

- Gardens contain lots of different textures naturally. Many more can be added by the gardener. You can explore shape, temperature, wetness and dryness through texture.
- Planting plants with different textures can help people with low vision orient themselves within the garden and explore it.
 - Lambs ear, mint-scented geranium, and Spanish lavender are great plants that bring out soft and fuzzy textures.
 - Bulbous oat grass, fennel and red fountain grass are great for exploring tickly textures.
 - Mexican grass tree, sea holly and hens-and-chickens are common examples of prickly textures.
 - Add walls or statues to explore rough, smooth, ridged and bumpy surfaces.
- If using plants to explore touch, make sure they are safe to touch and are non-toxic.
- Use a metal grid placed on top of garden beds as a guide for planting for people who garden by touch.

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To highlight the sense of sound:

- Listening can help people tune into their environment. Rustling leaves, birds singing, running water and striking chimes are some sounds that can be used. Adding bird feeders and bird houses are great ways to bring hummingbirds and other birds to your garden, which add to sound. Some plants naturally attract birds too, such as sunflowers, red salvia and trumpet vine.
- Some plants, like willow trees and ornamental grasses, make a lot of noise when the wind blows through them.
- People who are deaf can sense vibrations and percussive sounds. Consider using deer-scarers, also called Chinese tapping water features, and 'sound fences'. Sound fences can be made by dragging a stick across piping or tubing.

Resources

For more information on designing your garden around the five senses, read *Sensory Garden Design Advice* and *Sensory Garden: What's that then?* This can be found by visiting www.sensorytrust.org.uk and clicking the 'Publications and Resources' link.

If you would like to talk to someone about accessible gardening, or would like a garden assessment done, call Green Thumbs, Healthy Joints at **800-841-8436**.