

Creating a Sensory Garden

Sensory gardens are perfect for young children, plus they promote health and enjoyment of nature for all ages. Read on for suggestions of how to create a garden that appeals to all five senses.

Updated: July 5, 2023



Koreanspice viburnum is visually stunning and highly fragrant. Photo credit: Penn State Master Gardener Program

Some young friends of mine have a sweet, baby girl called Lucy. They recently moved into a new house where they have the opportunity to make their first garden together. Lucy's parents want her to acquire a knowledge of the natural world; I believe there's no better way than through a sensory garden. Infants learn about their environment through sight, touch, sound, taste, and smell; in a sensory garden plants are chosen to enliven the senses. I will explain how to create this type of garden that can be enjoyed by children of all ages, as well as by adults.

Design Considerations

Sensory gardens are suitable for small or large spaces. They may be designed for just one sense, such as a fragrance garden, or for all five senses. The garden should encourage the child's interaction with the environment. Here are some factors to consider:

- In addition to the plantings, hardscaping elements are important. Hardscaping encompasses the non-living parts of the garden. You may include sitting, standing, and climbing areas with different textures to see and touch. For example, consider grouping a circle of rough-textured tree stumps for seating.
- Sensory pathways may have various types of surfaces: sand, flagstone, woodchips, or perhaps smooth, flat stepping stones.
- Create child-size places such as a beanpole tepee or a vine-covered tunnel.

- The sensory garden must be a safe place, if users are to interact with them. Plants should be non-toxic, non-allergenic, and with no pesticide application. Blooms should be pollinated by insects rather than the plant releasing seeds in the air. Thorny plants like roses should be placed out of reach at the back of the beds.
- When choosing plants make sure they will do well in your growing conditions whether sun or shade, poor or good drainage, clay or another type of soil.
- Select plants that are hardy, durable, and of various heights, colors, textures, and scents.

The Sense of Sight

Contrasting elements of color, form, movement, light, and shadow add to our sensory experience when we look at a beautiful garden. Red, orange, and yellow are warm colors that promote activity. Cool colors such as blue, purple, and white encourage tranquility. Create a balance between energizing colors and restful, soft colors to avoid over stimulation. Accessories like gazing balls, mirrors, and sculpture add to the visual effect. Plant flowers of varying colors and blooming times, foliage of different shapes and sizes, and plants that butterflies love. Some suggestions: Bleeding heart (*Dicentra spectabilis*) with flowers that look like downward-facing hearts, gayfeather (*Liatris spicata*) with its soft, vertical flower spikes that bloom from the top down, butterfly weed (*Asclepias tuberosa*) to attract monarch butterflies, Swiss chard 'Bright lights' exhibiting vibrant, near florescent midribs through the center of the leaves, and tall sunflowers (*Helianthus moscheutos*) with large, showy blooms that draw butterflies and bees, then later attract birds for the seeds.

The Sense of Hearing

Some sounds in a sensory garden occur without planning—the wind through leaves, for example. Enhance the variety of sounds by including dripping or trickling water and wind chimes. Adding bird feeders and a birdbath encourage our feathered friends to stop by with their sweet songs. Leave leaves on the ground for your child to crunch underfoot. Plant balloon flowers (*Platycodon grandifloras*) that will make a popping sound when she squeezes the buds, and ornamental grasses like switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*)—they make a pleasant noise when the wind causes their tall, leafy stems to rub together. My grandchildren loved to shake the seed pods of false indigo (*Baptisia australis*) to hear the seeds rattle.

The Sense of Touch

When considering touch, think texture. Include soft flowers, fuzzy leaves, rough bark, prickly seed pods, and springy moss. Add smooth stones to your sensory garden to invite touch. The first plant that comes to mind for tactile stimuli is lambs' ear (*Stachys byzantine*) with its fuzzy, furry leaves. Yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*) is another good example for its stiff flowers and soft foliage. Feather reed grass (*Calamagrostis x acutiflora*), coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*), borage (*Borago officinalis*), Irish moss (*Chondrus crispus*), and cockscomb (*Celosia*) are all appealing to touch.

The Sense of Smell

When planning the sensory garden, think about both subtle and strong smells that a child can explore both directly (by sticking her nose in the flower) and indirectly (for example by stepping on an aromatic groundcover such as creeping thyme (*Thymus serpyllum*)). Nasturtium (*Tropaeolum majus*) has a delicate aroma, while the peony has a heady perfume. Some plants like sweet shrub (*Calycanthus floridus*) release their scent when the leaves or petals are crushed. Don't overwhelm by placing fragrant blooms too close together; space them at intervals around your garden. Include the resinous scent of pine needles and the new scents of fresh mulches and grass clippings. Many herbs have wonderful aromas: rosemary, lemon verbena, lavender, and chocolate mint for example. Include perennials like viburnum, lilac (*Syringa vulgaris*), witch hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*), catmint (*Nepeta racemosa* 'Walker's Low'), and creeping phlox (*Phlox subulata*). Plant hyacinth bulbs (*Hyacinthus orientalis*) in the fall for their sweet, strong scent in spring.

The Sense of Taste

I must stress that everything in a garden for children should be non-toxic. Allow your child to explore tastes in the garden by growing edible flowers. Take care to differentiate them from non-edible ones by placing them together in a designated area. Here are some suggestions and their flavors: violets (*Viola* species), Johnny-jump-ups (*Viola tricolor*) and pansies (*Viola x wittrockiana*) have a sweet, wintergreen or perfumed flavor. Bee balm flowers (*Monarda didyma*) have a citrus, minty flavor. Try the crisp, cucumber flavor of borage (*Borago officinalis*). The lavender-pink blooms of chives (*Allium schoenoprasum*) are best harvested when they are just beginning to open. They have a mild onion flavor. Lavender flowers (*Lavandula angustifolia*) smell wonderful and have a perfumed taste. In addition to flowers, consider growing fruit like strawberries (*Fragaria ananassa*) and blueberries (*Vaccinium* spp.) Grow vegetables and herbs—an early introduction to fresh, healthy food helps young children as they begin to make their own food choices.

I look forward to visiting the sensory garden that my young friends plan to create for Lucy. What a wonderful, safe, and calming way for her to explore her senses and learn about the environment around her. Sensory gardens, however, are not just for children. They are an innovative way to promote health and nature for everyone.

Authors
