

5 sensory garden ideas, according to experts

Engage and stimulate the senses with these suggestions

BY [JAYNE DOWLE](#) PUBLISHED: 09 AUGUST 2024



RHS / Neil Hepworth

Creating a sensory garden that engages sight, sound, smell, touch and taste sounds like a dream.

“You take a holistic approach,” says multi-RHS Chelsea medal-winner Ann-Marie Powell, founder of [Ann-Marie Powell Gardens](#), who picked up a RHS Silver-Gilt, the inaugural Children’s Choice Award, and the BBC People’s Choice Award for her Octavia Hill garden for the National Trust this year.

“Sensory gardens promote a deep emotional connection with the natural world, allowing everyone to find joy and purpose in nature.”

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Below our expert advice will empower you to design your own **garden**, or adapt one you already have, with all the senses in mind – to help you, and the people you share it with, get the most out of your outdoor space.

What is a sensory garden?

Sensory gardens are thoughtfully-planned and designed spaces that engage and stimulate the senses, offering benefits for health and **wellbeing**. A sensory garden aims to engage all five senses; sight, sound, smell, touch and taste.

When designing a sensory garden, inclusivity is paramount, says Ann-Marie: “It's essential to create a space that caters to a wide range of individuals and groups, providing not only aesthetic pleasure but therapeutic benefits, too.”



Children, particularly, benefit from sensory gardens as they offer learning opportunities, instilling a sense of purpose and encouraging exploration. “Also, for people living with dementia, these gardens provide cognitive and sensory stimulation, opportunities for social interaction and a safe space for exercise and relaxation,” adds Ann-Marie.

How do you make a sensory garden?



Courtesy of Cuprinol

With a sensory garden it’s important to take your time and consider several important questions first, says Claire Francis, spokesperson for [The Sensory Trust](#), which offers advice on all aspects of sensory design.

“You need to establish the following; who is the garden for, bearing in mind needs around [accessibility](#), for instance, how will the garden be used, thinking seasonally, weekly and the time of day, and what resources do you have to hand or will need.”

First-time RHS Chelsea Italian designer Giulio Giorgi, founder of [Giulio Giorgi Gardens](#), who won a Gold medal for his World Child Cancer's Nurturing Garden Sanctuary Garden at RHS Chelsea, says he focuses on three main points when beginning to plan a sensory garden.

- Creating a sheltered site capable of cutting out external stimuli, such as busy roads, if it’s an [urban garden](#), or connecting to external natural features, such as hedges or forest patches, if the garden is set within a larger natural landscape.
- Choosing plants and hard materials specifically related to the touch, smell, sight, hearing and taste: “I don't separate areas for each sense but rather create highlights within mixed schemes”.
- Forging a journey through the garden so it can tell a story, taking care of access, the path and its branches, the rhythm of shade and sun-exposed spots.

An essential part of a sensory garden is a place to sit and contemplate, quietly hide away for a while or undertake gentle tasks and creative pursuits. It’s good to bring in a sheltered terrace – a sail is an affordable and instant way to create a roof for that important feeling of security – of if budget allows, a summer house or studio.

To reach this hideaway and other key features of a sensory garden, the inclusion of accessible paths and seating is crucial, says Ann-Marie. “This ensures those with mobility issues can comfortably navigate and enjoy the space. Timber seating and structures are ideal, as they evoke a sense of biophilia, connecting people with nature while being comfortable and durable.”



What plants are good for sensory gardens?

Choosing plants that reflect and complement surrounding nature rather than imposing an alien scheme is key to a sensory garden feeling ‘right’. Giulio says.

Above all, he really values the relationship between any sensory garden and its environment: “So a sensory garden on the French Riviera will have few common plants with one in Wales.”

However, Giulio does have favourite plants he always recommends for sensory gardens. “I really love the iris family and I have a selection of beautifully scented ones, mostly within the barbata types,” he says. “I also love using [the Cornelian cherry] *Cornus mas* or *Cornus officinalis*. Their flowers have a very atypical seashore-like smell and their fruits are utterly delicious.”

Thyme is a sensory stand-by for Giulio too. “Last but not least the thymes, that offer an immense diversity. You can find varieties and species adapted to different climates and having both textural, tactile, edible and scented qualities. Woolly thyme for touch, *Thymus 'Rose'* for scent, for example.”

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Sight

Perhaps one of the trickiest elements of a sensory garden to get right, sight depends on choice of colour and form. When placing plants and garden features, it’s really important to take your time; stand back and consider how each element relates to each other, and what will happen in time as plants mature.

“Colour is important because it provides a visual stimulus while adding order and balance, unity, rhythm, focal points, accents, and definition to a sensory garden,” says Julia Smith, a senior horticultural therapy practitioner at [Thrive](#), the Gardening for Health charity.

If you wish for a vibrant garden that uplifts emotions and supports activity, choose warm colours such as red, orange, and yellow, not being afraid to clash them together with energy.

On the other hand, cool colours, such as blue, purple, and white, are soothing and help create a tranquil space.

“Traditionally flowers are an effective way to add colour,” adds Julia. “However colourful fruits, foliage and bark can also enhance a garden’s visual appeal.”

Smell

In a sensory garden, the inclusion of fragrant plants is essential for creating a delightful atmosphere, with sweet perfume filling the air. “By incorporating aromatic plants such as lavender, rosemary, and jasmine, you can infuse the air with enchanting scents,” says Julian Palphramand, head of plants at [British Garden Centres](#). “These all have the power to elevate your mood and bring a sense of tranquillity to your surroundings.

Some of his sensory garden favourites include; roses for their rich, enveloping fragrance; jasmine and honeysuckle, with their intense and sweet evening scents; and that early summer favourite, sweet peas, known for their heady perfume.

Touch



Alice Meacham

Every sensory garden should have a tactile element. So consider plants with interesting textures. “Plants like Lamb's ear with its soft, velvety leaves, or the spiky texture of cordyline can provide a sensory experience that is both visually appealing and engaging to the touch,” says Julian.

Incorporating a variety of textures will create a dynamic and stimulating environment in your garden, heuchera offers smooth, sometimes ruffled leaves. Ornamental grasses add graceful, flowing foliage and feathery flower spikes, respectively. For touch, Julian suggests including silver sage with large, felt-like leaves, and the delicate, feathery fronds of various ferns.

Incorporating a mix of textures such as the broad, ribbed leaves of hostas, and the scalloped, fuzzy leaves of Lady's Mantle, will enhance sensory appeal. Adding plants like sea holly, with its spiky, metallic-looking foliage will create a visually pleasing and engaging environment that invites touch and exploration, enriching the overall sensory experience in the garden.

Sound



Crocus

A sensory garden is calm by nature. Steps should be taken to shield off noise. This can be achieved by paying attention to shelter, as mentioned above.

However, to actually engage the sense of sound, encourage the blissful sound of [birdsong](#) by hanging bird-feeders to bring feathered friends into the garden. What's more, plant pollinators such as Buddleia and lavenders to encourage buzzing bees or add wind chimes and tall rustling grasses – both of which pick up gentle breezes.

“Many overlook the power of sound, which whether through carefully chosen plants, materials, or the use of technology, enriches the garden experience,” says Ann-Marie. “This creates an immersive environment that resonates particularly with those who are visually impaired.”

Another wonderful way to enhance your garden’s soundscape is to add a water feature. “Sound is so important for mood setting,” says the team at garden company, [Crocus](#). “Take time to listen to a few different kinds of water features and decide which noise you find most appealing - a burble, trickle, spray or pour.”

In a more formal sensory garden, water features work best centrally where they can serve as focal points – for example, on circular paved areas or intersecting paths. If your garden’s more informal, think about where you spend most time, be it a quiet corner or a favourite bench.

Taste



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Including edible plants in your sensory garden has several benefits. Easy-to-grow herbs such as mint, basil, and chives not only add flavour to home-cooked food, but also release enticing scents when brushed against.

Tomatoes are another easy additional to a sunny sensory garden, as are strawberries and raspberries, which can be picked and eaten straight off the plant.

“Engage your nurturing instincts while growing vegetables, then enjoy the health benefits from eating the produce,” says Julia.

And don’t forget the edible flowers such as nasturtiums, calendula and violas not only add vibrant colours to a sensory garden, but bring their own flavours to garnishes and salads.



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