

Sense-a-tional Gardening:

Experiencing all five senses through plants

All gardens can stimulate our senses but did you ever think that you could design a garden specifically to enhance the sensory experience? We typically choose plants for how they look - color, form, texture - but you may also want to choose plants that stimulate your other senses like smell, touch, taste and even sound. Sensory gardens are a "one-stop-shop" for our brains to gather information from our eyes, ears, nose, mouth, and skin to help us make sense of our environment.

What is a sensory garden?

Sensory gardens are planted spaces where people can be immersed in the scents, textures, and sounds of nature by closely experiencing the attributes of selected plants. They can be any size or shape, and planted just about anywhere, in any thing. Some sensory gardens are designed specifically for one of the senses, while others focus on several. These important gardens encourage human interaction with plants. They often include interpretive signage, and access for the visitors to engage with the planted areas.

Because of the physical interaction visitors have with the plants in a sensory garden, it is best to eliminate pesticides to manage plant health issues. You can minimize potential pest issues by choosing plants with growing requirements (sunlight, soil type, moisture needs, planting space) that match the garden site conditions, planting properly, and physical removal of any pests. Accept that it's ok for plants to have some cosmetic damage from weather or light insect feeding - it won't kill them.

What are the benefits of a sensory garden?

A well designed and cared for sensory garden is best if you're looking for an immediate positive experience with plants. Sensory gardens can have a positive physical, mental and spiritual impact on those that use it. The sensory garden is an excellent place to recall past experiences and renew the senses making them a good choice when designing gardens for people with memory-related disorders. A sensory garden can enlighten and educate and is also a good option when working with children as they can interact with the plants in a hands-on experiential manner which might be prohibited in other gardens.

Design elements of sensory gardens

- **Walkways** - paths near the plants provide visitors the ability to be up close to touch, smell and even taste them.
- **Simplicity** - the sensory experience can be maximized when the garden is designed with fewer kinds of plants, but planted in larger numbers to enhance impact.
- **Habitat** - create a space where flowers can interact with insects, trees can make room for animal homes, shrubs can provide birds shelter and seeds can be gathered for food.
- **Plant selection** - choose plants that provide the desired sensory experience for visitors.
 - *Sight* - Choose eye-catching flower forms, sizes, bright-color leaves, lots of color and pattern. Consider the architecture of the seed and the beauty found in its shape, too. Or add a rain chain and watch the pattern of water cascading down. And don't forget about light and shadow and how contrast (think dappled light through a shade tree) lends itself to the sensory experience.
 - *Touch* - Look for plants with textures that are soft, fuzzy, crinkly, smooth, rough; flowers of different forms and sizes. Choose sturdy plants that can stand up to frequent handling and feathery grasses and plants with texture. Consider the texture of the container the plants are planted or the surface of the material in pathway attributing to the textual experience. And don't forget a lawn is an excellent addition as it allows a person to lie down and engage their entire body, not just hands, with the plants.
 - *Sound* - Grasses, rattling pods, stiff stems that knock together and leathery leaves all move in the breeze and create the sound of the garden. Include moving water and pollinator-attractive plants that add the buzz of bees. Add a pleasant sounding chime to help with navigation through the garden area. Sounds of animals enliven the garden as bird songs and squirrels are often a part of the sensory garden experience.
 - *Smell* - One of the strongest of the senses is our sense of smell! A fragrance found in a garden can create a life-long sensory experience. Choose flowers that are sweet, spicy, lemony, musky and leaves that can be crushed to emit fragrance. The larger the number of plants, the bigger the impact, so group similarly scented plants in distinct areas of the garden and along walks and paths so visitors can easily experience the specific scents.
 - *Taste* - Include fruits, vegetables, herbs and edible flowers. Herbs are the backbone of a sensory garden and can be planted in the ground or in movable containers for easy access. Consider plants that produce multiple edible parts (such as mint, cherry tomatoes, peas or strawberries) instead of a plant that only produces one fruit (such as cantaloupe). This allows more people to experience their sense of taste.

Finally and most importantly, you should consider the audience who will be using the garden and to provide inclusive stimulation for a multitude of senses beyond simply a visual appeal.

Recommended plants for Minnesota sensory gardens

Common Name	Scientific Name	Plant Type	Light	Spread	Height
Plants for Touch					
Lamb's Ear	<i>Stachys byzantina</i>	Perennial	Full sun, Part sun	12"	15"
Curly Leaf Parsley	<i>Petroselinum</i>	Annual	Full sun, Part sun	10"	12"
Scented Geranium	<i>Pelargonium</i>	Annual	Full sun, Part sun	20"	20"
Borage	<i>Borago officinalis</i>	Annual	Full sun	18"	24"
Pussy Willow	<i>Salix discolor</i>	Deciduous Shrub	Full sun	15'	20'
Globe Thistles	<i>Echinops</i>	Perennial	Full sun	24"	36"
Caladium	<i>Caladium x hortulanum</i>	Tender Bulb	Full shade, Part shade, Part sun	10"	14"
Gomphrena	<i>Gomphrena</i>	Annual	Full sun	8"	18"
Sensitive Fern	<i>Onoclea sensibilis</i>	Perennial	Full shade, Part shade	12"	36"
Also ornamental grasses					
Plants for Taste					
Tomatoes (fruits)	<i>Solanum lycopersicum</i>	Annual	Full sun	vary	vary
Sweet Peas (fruits)	<i>Lathyrus odoratus</i>	Annual	Full sun	6"	20"
Mints (leaves)	<i>Mentha</i>	Perennial	Full sun, Part sun	15"	15"
Pineapple Sage (leaves)	<i>Salvia elegans</i>	Annual	Full sun	24"	36"
Nasturtium (flowers)	<i>Tropaeolum majus</i>	Annual	Full sun, Part sun	12"	14"
Daylily (flowers)	<i>Hemerocallis</i>	Perennial	Full sun, Part sun	vary	vary
Chives (leaves, flowers)	<i>Allium schoenoprasum</i>	Perennial	Full sun, Part sun	15"	18"
Blueberries (berries)	<i>Vaccinium</i>	Deciduous Shrub	Full sun	4'	4'
Chokecherry (berries)	<i>Aronia</i>	Deciduous Shrub	Full sun, Part sun	6'	6'
Lemon Balm (leaves)	<i>Melissa officinalis</i>	Perennial	Full sun, Part sun	30"	36"

(continued) Recommended plants for Minnesota sensory gardens

Common Name	Scientific Name	Plant Type	Light	Spread	Height
Plants for Smell					
Petunias (not hybrid)	<i>Petunia</i>	Annual	Full sun	10"	10"
Stargazer Lily	<i>Lilium</i>	Hardy Bulb	Full sun, Part sun	18"	36"
Lilacs	<i>Syringa</i>	Deciduous Shrub	Full sun	vary	vary
Flowering Tobacco	<i>Nicotiana glauca</i>	Annual	Full sun, Part sun	24"	60"
Fragrant Heliotrope	<i>Heliotrope arborescens</i>	Annual	Full sun	15"	18"
Herbs:					
Garden Sage	<i>Salvia officinalis</i>	Annual	Full sun	20"	24"
Thyme	<i>Thymus</i>	Perennial	Full sun	12"	12"
Lavender	<i>Lavandula angustifolia</i>	Tender Perennial	Full sun	12"	18"
Dill	<i>Anethum graveolens</i>	Annual	Full sun	15"	30"
Sweet Basil	<i>Ocimum basilicum</i>	Annual	Full sun	18"	20"
Rosemary	<i>Rosmarinus officinalis</i>	Annual	Full sun	15"	18"
Plants for Sight					
Sunflower	<i>Helianthus</i>	Annual	Full sun	vary	vary
Zinnia	<i>Zinnia</i>	Annual	Full sun	vary	vary
Morning Glory	<i>Ipomoea purpurea</i>	Annual Vine	Full sun	15"	120'
Bearded Iris	<i>Iris germanica</i>	Perennial	Full sun, Part sun	15"	28"
Elephant Ear	<i>Colocasia</i>	Tender Bulb	Full sun, Part sun	48"	60"
Marigold	<i>Calendula officinalis</i>	Annual	Full sun, Part sun	12"	18"
Clematis	<i>Clematis</i>	Perennial Vine	Full sun	15"	120"
Coneflower	<i>Echinacea</i>	Perennial	Full sun	vary	vary
Coleus	<i>Coleus</i>	Annual	Part sun, Part shade	24"	24"
Allium	<i>Allium</i>	Hardy Bulb	Full sun	8"	26"
Swiss Chard	<i>Beta</i>	Annual	Full sun	18"	24"
Plants for Sound					
Love-in-a-Mist	<i>Nigella damascena</i>	Annual	Full sun	10"	24"
False Indigo	<i>Baptisia</i>	Perennial	Full sun, Part sun	24"	24"
Butterfly Weed	<i>Asclepias tuberosa</i>	Perennial	Full sun	15"	24"
Balloon Flower	<i>Platycodon grandiflorus</i>	Perennial	Full sun, Part sun	15"	24"
Oriental Poppy	<i>Papaver orientale</i>	Perennial	Full sun	18"	36"
Also ornamental grasses and gourds					