

Making a sensory garden

Jennifer Stackhouse, 2009

When we look at a garden with our eyes we see colour first and foremost then recognise shape and texture. But if you close your eyes, the garden is a very different place. It doesn't disappear but you are aware that there are elements in your garden that stimulate the other senses – smell, hearing, touch and taste.

Without sight the other senses are heightened, and you notice the smell not just of flowers but of leaves and even the soil and mulch the plants are growing in. The sounds made by wind rustling in foliage, or feet walking over different surfaces, are also part of the experience of visiting a garden when you can't see. You may hear birds or a wind chime or notice the splash of water.

As well as smelling and hearing a garden, you can also feel it through your hands and feet and through other parts of your body such as when branches or leaves brush against your face or legs.

And then there is taste. Don't forget to include some edible plants such as vegies, fruit and herbs.

Design and planting ideas

If you have a visually impaired person who regularly visits your garden, spend some time thinking about how you can develop the garden so that it appeals to all the senses. Here are some ideas.

- **Fragrant flowers all year round.** Select shrubs, climbers or perennials that have scented flowers at different times of the year. Suggestions include daphne, jasmine and violet for winter; buddleja and wisteria for spring; and murraya, gardenia and rose for late spring to autumn.
- **Fragrant highlights.** Complement your year-round planting with annual highlights such as hyacinth or freesia bulbs in pots. Stock and mignonette are fragrant annuals.
- **Include scented foliage.** Geranium (especially the scented leaf forms of pelargonium), lavender, tomato, native mint bush and many herbs are just some plants with scented leaves. Grow them so they encroach on paths or cover the ground so the smell good when you walk on them.
- **Texture.** Vary textures of paths and paving but don't create trip hazards. Gravel makes a satisfactory noise underfoot.

- **Rustling leaves.** Include plants that make a noise in the breeze such as casuarina and bamboo. And although they are too big for many gardens, I love the sound of the wind in the pine trees.
- **Think about plant texture.** Some leaves are soft and velvety like eupatorium, others are rough like the sandpaper fig or sharp like lomandra. The bark of crepe myrtle is smooth.
- **Include edible plants.** Rosemary is one plant that provides interest and taste all year round while basil and cherry tomatoes are great to grow in summer.
- **Think safety.** Avoid nasty surprises such as thorns and prickles, and make sure tools and hoses are safely stowed away.

To make gardening easier if you have a disability, consider using raised garden beds for growing plants. Have wide, solid paths to allow safe and easy access through the garden, replace awkward steps with ramps and remove trip hazards. Include seats and benches so there is always somewhere to rest and take in the scents and sounds of the garden.

More information

Horticultural Therapy Society of NSW based at the Telopea Centre at Ryde in Sydney can provide tools, advice and ideas to help overcome all sorts of disabilities and keep people gardening. They have fact sheets on gardening for the visually impaired and creating a sensory garden at www.cultivatensw.org.au or phone (02) 9448 6392.