



SHAWNEE COUNTY EXTENSION MASTER GARDENERS

SENSORY DEMONSTRATION GARDEN

Sensory Gardens

Sensory gardens are areas designed to stimulate one or more of the five senses: sight, smell, sound, taste, and touch. While often geared toward young children, sensory gardens are enjoyed by all ages. They can also be therapeutic for individuals with developmental or physical disabilities, sensory processing disorders, or cognitive challenges. A sensory garden has a more intentional approach by including and arranging specific plants to engage the senses.

Sight

Try contrasting color, texture, light, shadow, and form in the garden. Warm colors like red, orange, and yellow, are energizing, while cool colors, like blue, purple and white, are relaxing. Select for both! Bright mixes of garden zinnias (*Zinnia elegans*) or giant yellow sunflowers (*Helianthus annuus*) towering above the garden make for an invigorating pop of color, and both will attract beautiful butterflies to the garden.

- Bleeding hearts, *Dicentra spectabilis*. Heart-shaped flowers
- Butterfly weed, *Asclepias tuberosa*. Attracts butterflies
- Cockscomb, *Celosia argentea*. Bright flowers
- Pinks, *Dianthus hybrid*. Soft colors, scent
- Zinnias, *Zinnia elegans*. Showy flowers, butterflies

Smell

The strongest human sense also has the potential to bring back specific memories and experiences to individuals. Catmint (*Nepeta × faassenii*), a hardy perennial that produces pale purple flowers from May to September, releases a light lavender-like scent when the leaves are rubbed. Fragrant herbs are also great plants to engage our sense of smell and test our recognition of herbs used in everyday products and recipes. These would include English lavender (*Lavandula angustifolia*), rosemary (*Salvia rosmarinus*), and anise hyssop (*Agastache foeniculum*).

- Creeping Thyme, *Thymus Serpyllum*. Scent
- Catmint, *Nepeta mussinii*. Cats love this.
- Anise Hyssop, *Agastache foeniculum*. Licorice-like scent
- Hyacinths, *Hyacinthus orientalis*. Sweet, strong scent flowers

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Research and Extension

Shawnee County

Contact us:

1740 SW Western Avenue
Topeka, KS 66604

785-232-0062

www.shawnee.k-state.edu

Sound

Some sounds in the garden occur naturally—wind blowing through the plants, or leaves crunching beneath our feet. Ornamental grasses, like switchgrass (*Panicum virgatum*), rustle in the wind. Dried seed pods on false blue indigo (*Baptisia australis*) can make natural maracas as the seed rattles against the hard pod.

- Balloon Flower, *Platycodon grandifloras*. Popping sound when squeezed
- False Indigo, *Baptisia australis*. Rattling seed pods
- Pigsqueak, *Bergenia cordifolia*. Foliage squeaks when rubbed
- Switchgrass, *Panicum virgatum*. Sound of wind through leaves

Taste

A variety of fruits, vegetables, and herbs can be added to a sensory garden to explore tastes in the garden. Edible flowers, including nasturtium (*Tropaeolum majus*) and pansy (*Viola × wittrockiana*) also make tasty additions. Flavorful herbs to include in the garden are basil (*Ocimum basilicum*), chives (*Allium schoenoprasum*), and lemon balm (*Melissa officinalis*). Clearly identify which plants are edible in the garden, and don't combine edibles with toxic plants.

- Chives, *Allium schoenoprasum*. Mild onion-like flavor
- Nasturtium, *Tropaeolum majus*. Peppery flavor
- Mint, *Mentha* spp. Peppermint or spearmint

Touch

A variety of textures to explore, including rough, smooth, fuzzy, and even sticky should be offered through plant bark, foliage, flowers, seeds, and fruits. Tough plants that can withstand frequent handling should be selected. Lambs ear (*Stachys byzantine*) is a favorite fuzzy leaf plant to include. In contrast, succulent plants, including hens & chicks (*Sempervivum tectorum*) or sedums (*Sedum* spp.) offer a smooth, fleshy leaf.

- Lambs' Ears, *Stachys byzantine*. Soft, furry foliage
- Satiny Wormwood, *Artemisia schmidtiana*. Fine, silky foliage
- Woolly Thyme, *Thymus pseudolanuginosus*. Fine, soft hairs on leaves

Right Plant, Right Place

Just like with any garden, select plants that are hardy to your area, and of various color, height, textures, and bloom times. To ensure safety in the garden, plants should be non-toxic, and pesticides should not be applied. A sensory garden can be a calming place while also being a great spot for all to explore their senses and interact with the environment and plants around them.

Find a detailed guide to creating a sensory garden at go.illinois.edu/SensoryGarden

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