

# Sensory Gardens

## What is a sensory garden?

The idea of a sensory garden is that plants, hard landscaping and other garden materials and features are selected for their appeal to all five senses with the aim of offering a richer and perhaps more therapeutic experience to a range of people with different needs. There may be other specific aims, for example, encouraging the development of certain sensory abilities like smell or touch, or creating a protected, interesting place for people with physical disabilities who may enjoy being, working and socialising outdoors. The Sensory Trust define a sensory garden as “a self-contained area that concentrates a wide range of sensory experiences. Such an area, if designed well, provides a valuable resource for a wide range of uses, from education to recreation.” (Sensory Trust, 2007)

In essence, all gardens are places where our senses are stimulated. What distinguishes a sensory garden from a traditional garden environment is the considered inclusion of features with particular sensory qualities, with the intention of creating a stimulating and beneficial environment for disabled people. Such sensory features not only induce sensory responses but can also provide individuals with natural ‘cues’ that help them interpret and better utilise the environment.

Multi-sensory design is becoming more and more popular, especially within special schools, hospitals and residential homes. Some may be designed to be purely passive – inviting the user to be able to sit and relax, be comfortable and feel serene and safe. Some may be designed to be more active, and promote interaction – where the whole ethos is to encourage users to explore, touch or taste, and interact with particular plants, features or objects.

Whether you are designing and building a sensory garden from scratch or adapting an existing garden, there will be certain areas for consideration in order to create a fully inclusive multi-sensory environment.

This briefing sheet will give some guidelines, advice and sources of further information to assist with creating such an environment.

**Thrive Briefing  
Sheet no:**

**1**

## Resources

### **The Enabling Garden – creating barrier-free gardens**

Gene Rothert  
Taylor Publishing  
Company – 1994  
ISBN 0-877833-874-0

### **Landscape Design for Elderly and Disabled People**

Jane Stoneham and Peter Thoday  
Packard Publishing – 1994  
ISBN 1 870673 20 4

### **A Garden for You – a practical guide to tools, equipment and design for older people and people with disabilities**

Fred Walden  
Disabled Living  
Foundation – 1997  
ISBN 0 9019908 69 X

### **Gardening Within Arms Reach**

Hans Schuman  
Bartiméus - 1998  
ISBN 90-71534-29-4  
[www.bartimeus.nl](http://www.bartimeus.nl)

## Design

The design process needs to begin by consulting with the people who are going to use the garden. Get a clear idea of how users might experience each area or feature and ask them about their interests and needs. Group planning sessions could be part of the overall project or social and therapeutic programme.

Considerations should be made around both the 'hard' and 'soft' landscaping – including accessibility – and how these elements of the garden will interact with the changing seasons. For example, wind chimes, sculptures and materials which echo with rainfall or pebbles which take on different colours when they become wet. Make sure any planting is in the right place in terms of growing conditions, and more specifically in terms of selection depending on what sensory experience needs to be achieved. For example, plants for taste, touch and texture need to be robust enough to be picked, squashed and crushed. Plants for scent, sound and sight need to contrast in colour, shape or movement of light, and consider plants that have scent during the day or at dusk.

### **Key design considerations**

- establish the needs of all stakeholders
- design for everyone to enjoy the space equally
- start small – allow the garden to develop over time
- keep it flexible to allow for changing needs and interests
- ensure proper maintenance
- provide adequate seating and tables, in shade and sun, allowing space for wheelchairs
- attract wildlife in the garden to provide further stimulation
- involve the local community to encourage integration
- as well as the five senses consider movement, temperature, gravity, space and enclosure
- include lots of art and craft.  
(taken from Chamberlain 2005)

**Remember...** If you don't have a garden or enough outdoor space, you can still create a sensory experience – either using containers, pots of herbs or scented and tactile plants on a windowsill, or using plants placed in different rooms to create a sensory trail.

## **The benefits**

Taste, touch, smell, sound, and visual elements can all add to the experience of being in a garden. Textures such as the velvety leaves of Stachys or the tactile and architectural nature of Aloe vera can provide a talking point, stimulate tactile abilities – whether soft or spiky and help those without sight to identify plants. Scents too can be either relaxing/therapeutic, evoking a sense of calm, e.g. Lavender or stimulating e.g. Jasmine. Scents can also assist orientation in the garden as well.

## **Key benefit considerations**

- a calm area with seating (use blue and green planting) is of particular benefit for managing challenging behaviour
- the use of mirrors can promote self-awareness for people with learning disabilities, and increases sense of space in the garden
- area of grass (possibly under a tree) – accessible to wheelchair users allowing sensory experience of lying in the grass
- use of trees to provide shade, attract wildlife and provide further stimulation
- use colour to provide focal points, create stimulating areas using hot, vibrant colours
- create calm areas using cool, relaxing colours
- use smell, not just pleasant scents but unpleasant as well, to provide contrast
- include interactive features to promote learning and to entice people into the garden
- create interesting routes through the garden to promote a sense of discovery and orientation
- use lots of different textures and colours of material, not just in the plants e.g. recycled glass
- provide raised beds at different heights to allow for appropriate access for as many people as possible including children.

(taken from Chamberlain 2005)

## **Healing Gardens – therapeutic benefits and design recommendations**

Clare Cooper  
Marcus/Marni Barnes  
John Wiley & Sons Inc –  
1999  
ISBN 0 471 199023 1

## **The Healing Landscape: Therapeutic Outdoor Environments**

Martha M Tyson  
McGraw-Hill Companies  
Inc – 1998  
ISBN 0070 657 688

## **Informal Countryside Recreation for Disabled People – a practical guide for countryside managers**

The Countryside Agency  
– 1994  
ISBN 0 86170 408 8  
[www.countryside.gov.uk](http://www.countryside.gov.uk)

## **Making Connections: a guide to accessible greenspace**

Richard Price and Jane Stoneham  
The Sensory Trust –  
2001  
ISBN 0 952 6745 3X  
[www.sensorytrust.org.uk](http://www.sensorytrust.org.uk)

## **Allergy Free Gardening – the revolutionary guide to healthy landscaping**

Thomas Leo Ogren  
Ten Speed Press, USA –  
2000  
ISBN 1580081665  
[www.allergyfree-gardening.com](http://www.allergyfree-gardening.com)

## Management, planning and sustainability

Whether building from scratch, or adapting an existing garden, the design and/or changes may be dependant upon budget and space. If you are really pushed for space, you could create a sensory patio with container planting, or even a window box with fragrant and tactile herbs. The budget will determine whether you are able to employ architects, consultants and landscape designers, whether your approach is to involve the project and users, the wider community or a combination. Whichever route your budget dictates, the planning process needs to look at more than just the design and construction, it will need to incorporate how the garden is to be maintained. Find out how much ownership from the users is possible, as this will determine the sustainable level of maintenance required to keep the sensory garden at its best in offering the ultimate sensory experience.

## Accessibility

In order to provide and appreciate a sensory experience, the garden needs to be accessible. This applies to both external access – how will people get to the garden from the bus stop or adjacent building and internal access, for example paths and walkways within the garden.

The construction of paths, seating, features and plant beds will affect whether wheelchair users, children or those with bad backs for example, can hear, taste, touch, smell and see the plants or features. Raised beds may be necessary to bring the plants to the gardener's level and firm, non-slip path surfaces to allow easier wheelchair navigation.

If you are designing the garden with visual impairment in mind, large print and/or Braille signage in weatherproof materials and at an accessible height may be something to consider if your budget will allow. For people with learning disabilities – especially those with limited literacy skills, pictorial signing systems will allow access to the same interpretive information as reading gardeners or visitors.

Inclusive design is not necessarily aimed at people with disabilities, and it will not always be possible or practical for the garden to be fully accessible. But it is important that people are sufficiently well-informed about what the garden has to offer, so that they can make their own choices.

## Contacts

- **Thrive**  
Tel: 0118 988 5688  
[www.thrive.org.uk](http://www.thrive.org.uk)  
[www.carryongarden.org.uk](http://www.carryongarden.org.uk)  
Refer to the Thrive Training and Education Programme for training relating to Sensory Gardening. Alternatively we can offer Bespoke Training tailored to meet your specific needs.
- **Centre for Accessible Environments**  
Tel: 020 7357 8182  
[www.cae.org.uk](http://www.cae.org.uk)
- **The Sensory Trust**  
Tel: 01726 222900  
[www.sensorytrust.org.uk](http://www.sensorytrust.org.uk)
- **Fieldfare Trust**  
Tel: 01334 657708  
[www.fieldfare.org.uk](http://www.fieldfare.org.uk)

## References

Sensory Trust, Sensory Garden Design Advice, 2007

Feasibility Study into the Renaissance of the WROC (Wokingham Opportunities and Resource Centre) Sensory Garden, Wendy Chamberlain, 2005.