

Senses working overtime

Diana Muir of the Plant Plot in Lichfield talks to Staffordshire Life about the design elements and benefits of a sensory garden.

In defining a 'sensory garden', you could argue that all gardens, by their very nature, are sensory with elements appealing to our senses – touch, smell, sight, sound and even taste. However, designing a garden with the specific aim of being a 'sensory garden' demands much more careful planning so that you make the most of every potential sensory experience.

A sensory garden begins, like all good garden design, with a plan sketched in detail on paper. When thinking about your design, a highly sensory concept is 'zoning': sectioning off specific areas of your outdoor space for different functions. Think about having a quiet area, ideal for relaxation. You could have a vibrant, active area using water, noise and interactive elements such as willow tunnels, climbing features or stepping stones. You could have also zones of particular colour reflected in plant choice and garden ornaments.

Although we tend to think of the five senses of sight, smell, taste, touch and hearing, there are other elements to be considered: orientation and interaction with the space you are in - being sympathetic with moods and so on. Pathways don't just serve the purpose of taking you straight to another place – they can add to the experience by winding through the space and including aspects such as sculptures or water features, which may be hidden from immediate view.

When choosing what to plant, consider colour, shape, movement, texture, taste and scent. If plants are going to be touched, tugged or clambered upon then they need to be robust, suitable for the purpose and carefully sited.

Movement: Movement of plants and flowers can be stimulating – think of how trees sway in the breeze, tall grasses shimmer in the sun and the rustle of leaves in a hedge. Plant lavender and rosemary bushes along pathways so the aroma is released as you brush by them, these are pretty herbs with soothing, calming qualities.

Textures: The natural environment is full of different textures and people with visual impairments in particular rely on these to interpret where they are and what is around them. Options for providing texture in the planting scheme include rough surfaces like lichens or bark; smooth surfaces - flower petals and stones; ridged leaves; hairy – stems, buds, seed heads and so on. By encouraging visitors to touch different textures will make your garden come alive as touch truly helps you to connect with everything around you. Who can resist touching a bushy Pampas grass as they wander past?

Scent: One of the most obvious sensory experiences is smell. Taking in the various scents as you walk through an outdoor space plays a big part in the sensory garden. Roses, Mock orange, winter honeysuckle, curry plant and even pond water and cut grass all contribute to the outdoor experience. Beware however of extremely strong aromas. Jasmine, for example, isn't to everyone's taste. Water that has been left to stagnate in pots or drains will also have an adverse effect on the senses!

Taste: Taste can be a useful way of demonstrating where food comes from and shows the link between growing and eating. Including an allotment or herb garden is a great idea, particularly if you grow produce that can be easily picked, washed and eaten in the garden such as soft fruits.

Mirrors and other metallic materials can be put to good use to define shape and change the dimension of a space. Lighting can magnify statement plants to dramatic effect when lit from below or dots of light can be used to simply define a walkway. Seating and large throw cushions can transform an area to make it into a comfortable, relaxing sanctuary. Music is also something you might consider if it will enhance the atmosphere you have created. Fire can also be used to stunning effect but obviously its use must be carefully considered from every safety angle. Even the introduction of animals might be something to consider - whether you encourage birds and other wildlife to your garden or opt for pets such as rabbits and guinea pigs.

Sensory gardens are becoming increasingly popular for their therapeutic value and are increasingly included in the grounds of hospitals or special needs schools. For example people who have mobility issues can really connect with a sensory garden in more ways than a traditional garden. Raised beds and smooth pathways are ideal for wheelchair users where they can get involved with nature,

maybe planting and growing things for themselves whilst also enjoying being a part of it.

There is no doubt that sensory gardens can make a great contribution to emotional and physical wellbeing. They can be beautiful places to relax, reflect, meditate, contemplate and talk. They can be active, physical and demanding. They can be, quite simply, whatever your senses yearn for!

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