

Gardening for the Senses

Outdoor Sensory Gardens & Indoor Sensory Circles

By Hank Bruce & Tomi Jill Folk

*"The greatest gift of the garden
is the restoration of the five senses."*
Hanna Rion

Introduction

In this course you will learn about sensory gardens, including the important design elements and plant selection, and the major benefits and functions. You will explore how to incorporate the five senses into an outdoor garden and also discover how it is possible to create an indoor sensory garden. Finally, you will learn the 'sensory circle' approach to horticultural therapy, which is particularly useful when working with people with Alzheimer's disease. At the end of the course there is also a section about plant safety.

All Gardens are Sensory

Many of us feel the need to be engaged with nature by touching and smelling the moist earth, as well as appreciating the drama and beauty of the landscape. But even for those who enjoy horticulture by simply strolling through a botanical garden or arboretum, it is not a totally passive exercise. We can't help ourselves. We inhale the multitude of scents. We hear the breeze, birds and insects.

One can't stroll through a garden without becoming a part of it, because all of the senses are affected. We all experience the people-plant connection. We all see, feel, smell, or taste the wonders of life that make the landscape, the back garden, the vegetable patch, the park, or the African violet on the windowsill so alluring to us. We are instinctively drawn through our senses to the mystery, beauty, comfort and promise that these plants provide. There are not many



people who can walk through a park or botanical garden and not stop to smell the flowers, listen to the breeze as it gives the leaves voice and motion, or watch the butterflies. Instinctively we reach out (even when the signs sternly tell us 'DO NOT TOUCH'!) and touch the leaves or bark of a tree or stroke a flower's petal.

By employing all our senses, we stimulate the body, mind and spirit. We see images in our mind from the past and feel comforted, uplifted and inspired. We dare to contemplate and anticipate tomorrow. In the garden, we see the reality of life from birth to death. And then there is the rebirth and regeneration of a new season. The mind is actively engaged, even when the hands are not. The mind is never passive in the garden.

Claudia was one of a small group on an outing from a day care centre for elderly people with dementia. One day they went to the local park. Her wheelchair was parked in the semi shade of an oak tree briefly while the volunteer who was pushing her went to help one of the other members of the group. When the volunteer returned, Claudia was slowly waving her hands and reaching as far as she could. She turned to the volunteer and said, "Look, I've got leaves on my hands." She was playing with the shadows of the oak leaves. She then discovered that, "Where there are no leaves, it's warmer." She watched the pattern of shadows slowly moving about on the ground. "Isn't it beautiful? It's like they're dancing."

In the garden, we can find security, adventure, mystery, intrigue, sustenance and beauty. Strolling through the garden soothes stressed emotions while stimulating all of our senses. The garden is an ever-changing kaleidoscope of colour. There's a constant teasing of scents and aromas. There's always something that calls to us to be touched or tasted, and the music of the garden is the impromptu harmony of nature. Even when the garden is only a pot on the windowsill, there is sensory magic to be experienced there.

What is a Sensory Garden?

We've established that all gardens stimulate the senses and that it's impossible to stroll through a garden and not have a sensory experience. However, some gardens stimulate the senses to a greater degree than others. In 'sensory gardens', plants and other design elements are specially selected with the intention to provide experiences for seeing, smelling, hearing, touching, and tasting. A sensory garden is specifically created to provide individual and combined sensory opportunities for the user that they may not normally experience.



The idea of purpose-built sensory gardens is not new, but it is certainly gaining momentum. Gardens have always been special places, intended as a treat and a retreat. In ancient Egypt at the time of the pharaohs, depressed and mentally ill members of the court were taken on leisurely strolls through the royal gardens. In medieval Spain, poor hospital patients worked in the gardens to pay their bills. These patients had better recovery rates than the wealthy people who didn't spend time in the gardens. The

traditional English gardens of a century or two ago were designed to dispel melancholy. Also, physically and mentally wounded soldiers in WWI were helped with 'garden therapy'.

Sighted people tend to appreciate gardens first for their visual beauty, but throughout time, garden designers have taken all the senses into account. It seems likely that the term 'sensory garden' originated with people designing gardens specifically for the blind or visually impaired. (If the person could not see the things in the garden, they could at least smell, hear and feel them.)

What's the Function of a Sensory Garden?

Sensory gardens can serve many functions. Some have been designed for use as venues for teaching, socialising, healing, and horticultural therapy. The ill or weakened can be enlivened and renewed physically, mentally or spiritually by sensory gardens. Individuals with impairment of one or more of their five senses may find special enjoyment because they may have enhanced perception in their other senses.



At any rate, the scope of sensory garden design varies from place to place. Some gardens consider themselves sensory gardens because they have adapted the pathways and changed the heights of the beds to be more accessible to wheelchair users. Others call themselves sensory gardens because the choice of plant material offers stimulation to all the senses, not just sight and smell.

No matter what the designer's interpretation of a 'sensory garden' actually is, the expectation is that the garden will be accessible and designed for maximum enjoyment. A related but not identical movement is the therapeutic and healing garden, where the garden is deliberately intended to aid in growth and recovery.

Quick Summary

- All gardens are sensory, but a 'sensory garden' is specifically designed with sensory stimulation in mind.
- Sensory gardens were probably first designed for the visually impaired.
- People have known for a long time that gardens can be healing.

Designing the Sensory Garden

A sensory garden is much more than raised beds and lavender. Opportunities exist to enrich the visitor's experience through design for the full range of the senses. The design and layout provide a stimulating journey through the senses, heightening awareness and bringing positive experiences.

Well-designed sensory gardens can be simultaneously stimulating and relaxing. They can be created in spaces that are small or large, private or public.

Gardens with a variety of sensory elements are particularly effective in association with healthcare facilities such as nursing homes and hospitals, as well as schools, parks, botanical gardens, and other institutions. The audiences and objectives for every sensory garden may vary; however, a number of design considerations are common to all.

Hardscape Elements

Hardscape elements are the components of the landscape not composed of living plants – paths, benches, arbours, walls, statues, etc. Paving materials for garden paths can vary throughout the garden – brick, stone, woodchip, mulch, etc. However, accessibility is crucial! Sensory gardens usually have an enhanced infrastructure to permit wheelchair access and meet other accessibility concerns. Pathway width should be a minimum of 48 inches (1.2m), with an ideal of 60 inches (1.5m) for wheelchair access.

Putting the garden within reach is important. Raised planting beds can provide easy access to plants for all garden users, and are especially helpful to the visually impaired and wheelchair users. Outdoor gardens don't have to be muddy patches of ground way down below, out of reach. In addition to raised beds, the use of containers, arbours, trellises, vertical gardens, and even gardens on wheels can make the garden accessible to residents using wheelchairs, walking frames, and canes.



Seating in the sensory garden should be placed strategically for functionality and to maximise enjoyment of the space. Seating can be an opportunity for sensory experience. Consider the options, from grouping a circle of large, rough-textured tree stumps, to placing a smooth metal bench that becomes warm or cool depending on the position of the sun. Seating with pergolas and gazebos can incorporate fragrant plants.

Signage is a key element of a sensory garden. Visitors will be more inclined to interact with plants if they are prompted by clear labelling. One approach is to use colour-coded signs.

Plant Selection

As in designing any garden, plants should be selected that will thrive in the environment particular to each garden. An objective in sensory garden design is to encourage users to interact with the plants, often directly, maybe by breaking off leaves to smell or taste. Therefore, plants that would require pesticide applications in order to do well should not be selected for sensory gardens. Poisonous or allergenic plants should also be avoided. (*See the Plant Safety section at the end of this course.*)

Some plant species can serve multiple roles in a sensory garden. For example, mint plants provide both scent and taste opportunities.

Plants arranged in themed designs can engage garden users and elicit memorable experiences. Popular themes include plants from different regions of the world or cultures, medicinal plants, moonlight gardens, butterfly gardens and Biblical gardens.

A moonlight garden is a garden that is designed to be enjoyed at night, under the light of the full moon. The design of the garden incorporates plants with highly reflective foliage and flowers that will appear to glow under the light of the moon, as well as aromatic plants which will fill the air with their scents after dark. Most commonly, a moonlight garden appears as part of a larger garden, as moonlight gardens do not always look very exciting by the light of day.

All of the Senses in the Garden

Some sensory gardens are devoted specifically to one sense, such as a 'fragrance garden' or 'sound garden'. Others focus on several senses, with separate sections devoted to each sense. A third approach is a blend that enlivens all of the senses throughout the garden: sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch.

Sight

Colour, visual texture, form, movement, and light and shadow stimulate the sense of sight. Contrasts of these elements add to the sensory experience.

Colour provides a visual stimulus while adding order and balance, unity, focal points, and definition to a garden. Warm colours such as red, orange, and yellow, enliven the emotions and promote activity. Cool colours, such as blue, purple, and white, tend to be soothing and promote tranquillity. Flowers are a traditional and effective way to add colour. Colourful fruits, foliage and bark can also significantly enhance a garden's visual appeal.



Plants with interesting visual textures add to the sensory garden experience. Excellent additions for sensory gardens include smooth, rough, ruffled, fuzzy, or lacey-textured plants. The overall texture of a plant is another consideration. For example, a fine-textured plant has small leaves and a somewhat sparse appearance, while a coarse-textured plant has large leaves and a fuller appearance.

Plants come in many forms, including upright, open, weeping, cascading, or columnar. Individual parts of plants, such as leaves or fruit, have their own forms, such as round, toothed, or spherical.

Movement can be added to the garden in a number of ways. Some examples include plants that sway in the wind, moving water features, pools with floating leaves or flowers, fish in ponds, windsocks, weather vanes, butterflies and birds. A sensation of movement can be achieved by designing planting beds so that the eye is drawn through a sequence of focal points and vistas.

Light and shadow are often overlooked, but they are important visual elements in a garden. Possibilities for contrast can be subtle, such as dappled sunlight through the shade of a leafy tree, or dramatic, such as a dark tunnel of willow or vines that leads to an open area of full sun.

Accessories for enhancing visual pleasure include coloured floodlights, torches, mirrors, and gazing globes. Mobiles and sculptures can also add visual stimuli.

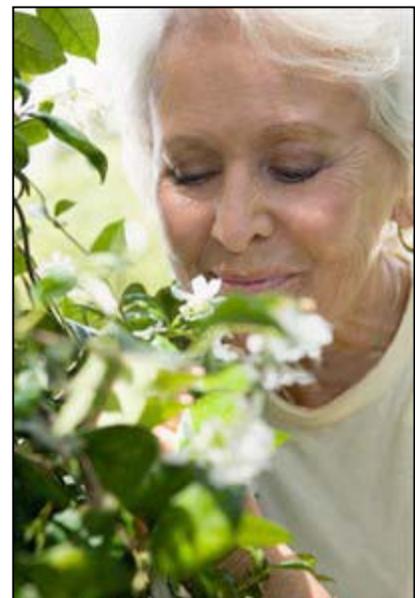
Smell

The sense of smell is deeply emotional and associative. Scent in the garden can create a lasting sensory experience. This can be especially meaningful for the visually impaired. A fragrance can evoke long-buried memories. Crushing and smelling a plant part is also a classic method of plant recognition and identification.

It is easy to incorporate the fragrances of delicate nasturtium blossoms, the heady perfume of gardenia, or the resinous scent of pine needles into a garden. Many edible species also have strong fragrance, such as tomatoes, citrus, and of course, herbs and spices. If the garden will be used in the evening, include plants that release their fragrance at night, such as night-blooming jasmine.

Some plants release their fragrance into the air with the heat of the sun, while others release their scent only when crushed. When fragrant creeping herbs, such as thyme, are planted among pathways, walking or wheeling on them will release their aroma. Paths with thyme or mint growing between the stones or along the edges are scented as the leaves are bruised along the way.

The timing of garden maintenance activities should be considered for their effect on scents in the air. For example, the smell of lawnmower exhaust is unappealing to most, but the fragrance of freshly cut



grass can send many into rapture. Mowing the grass shortly before garden users arrive will enhance the sensory experience.

Sound

Opening the ears in a garden expands the senses and broadens the garden experience. Opportunities can be provided in a sensory garden for sitting under a tree to hear the sound of wind rushing through the leaves. Many plants offer sounds with a small amount of wind or jostling – bamboo stems knock together, grasses rustle, palm fronds swish. Seed pods of some plants make natural maracas, or sound shakers. Leaves can be left on the ground to crunch underfoot.



You can bring cheerful, natural tones to your garden in other ways. To enjoy the sound of birdsong, hang a bird feeder. Birds will fill the garden with singing and chattering if birdbaths, bird-attracting plants, and birdhouses are provided and maintained. Sounds of other animals enliven the senses too. Oak trees can host squirrels that chatter and scramble.

Garden accessories can add sounds to your garden. Place wind chimes where they will catch a breeze and play a peaceful melody. Fountains, waterfalls, and water harps can provide the soothing sound of water. You can add music by using outdoor speakers. You can even purchase outdoor speakers that look like rocks.

Touch

In a sensory garden, people should be encouraged to touch plants. Plants should be chosen that are durable enough to withstand frequent brushing or handling. Tactile delights can be found in soft flowers, fuzzy leaves, springy moss, rough bark, succulent leaves, and prickly seed pods. Even sticky fruit and gooey plant saps can stimulate the sense of touch.



Incorporate plants that feel good on the skin, such as soft, plush lamb's ears. Plant aloe in a container garden and you can break off a leaf to release its cool, soothing gel.

Some species offer a variety of textures within a single plant. A classic example is the rose, with its delicate petals and thorny stems.

Plants in large pots placed along the garden paths can be brushed and touched without stooping. An excellent addition to a touch garden is a lawn where people can take their shoes off and wiggle their

toes in the grass. Water features within reach, with water lilies and other aquatic plants to touch, also provide tactile experiences, and a 'touch pool' where hands can be dipped in cool refreshing water can be fun.

Garden accessories that stimulate the sense of touch include outdoor misting machines and sculpture. If your space is large enough for seating, make sure you use comfortable, well-cushioned pieces that invite you and your guests to linger. For a touch of zen, fill a saucer with sand and place it near your favourite chair. Running a cultivator or your fingers through the sand can help you relax and focus your thoughts.



Taste

In a sensory garden, the taste buds can tingle from edible fruits, vegetables, herbs, and spices. Vegetables and fruit trees are a valuable addition to the garden. Those with brightly coloured foliage or fruit are the best ones to use. The scent of tomato plants is very stimulating and makes a great memory trigger and conversation starter.

Fresh herbs, vegetables, and fruits not only satisfy the palate, but they also bring beauty to your garden. For kitchen gardens, plant herbs in small individual pots that can be displayed in window boxes. Also, many small fruit trees and vegetable plants can be grown in containers.

To ensure that everyone gets a taste, include plants that can produce a large number of edible parts over time, such as mint leaves, strawberries, or edible flowers, rather than species with more limited production, such as squash. Including plants that can be tasted in the sensory garden provides teaching opportunities about good nutrition. It is also an excellent way to evoke memories about farming and gardening.



Providing space for food preparation, cooking and eating brings taste directly to the garden. This can be accomplished simply with an outdoor barbeque grill and a picnic table in the shade. A small pavilion for preparing herbal tea from the garden is a wonderful addition that adds an Eastern cultural element.

Caution: All precautions must be taken with a sensory garden and not all suggestions above are appropriate for everyone. Be aware of all safety hazards and plant allergies. (See the Plant Safety section at the end of this course.) Also, make sure gardeners and maintenance staff do not use toxic chemicals or pesticides on or near your sensory garden.

Quick Summary

- The hardscape elements of a sensory garden are all of the elements that are not living plants and include things like paths, gazebos, seating, and signage.
- You should be aware of plant allergies and sensitivities when selecting plants for a sensory garden.
- The sense of sight is stimulated in the garden through colour, plant textures, forms and shapes, movement of things in the garden, and light and shadow.
- Scents in the garden can bring back memories. Garden scents are especially meaningful for the visually impaired.
- Sounds in a sensory garden can include the natural sounds of moving plants, birds singing, and wind chimes. Recorded sounds can be added.
- Plants in a sensory garden should be able to withstand lots of touching. Besides different plant textures, other things for tactile stimulation include touching pools and sand displays.
- Plant herbs, fruits, and vegetables – things people can nibble on. Also, provide areas where you can prepare and cook food right there in the garden. (When the weather allows!)

More Tips for Creating Outdoor Sensory Gardens

- The visual elements of the garden ordinarily would not be designed with the visually impaired in mind. Partially sighted people, however, may be able to perceive large blocks of riotous colour. This factor may be considered in the design of some hardscape components and planting beds.
- By their very nature, sensory gardens are designed to be handled. Therefore, plants may experience damage and need to be replaced occasionally. This is okay. The sensory garden exists for the benefit of the **people** using it, not the plants growing there.
- Where possible, visitors to the garden should have the opportunity to work with the plants and do some gardening. This enhances the sensory experiences.
- Plants with different scents shouldn't be grouped together. They are best appreciated when they are far enough apart that the fragrances don't mingle. They can be spaced out among the shrubbery and textured plants.
- It is best to use more than one of each species where space permits. Also, make sure to group plants with similar light and water needs.
- Raised beds and decorative containers are effective and convenient landscape features. Varied heights and hanging baskets are also effective.
- The use of textural variety in landscape accessories is also helpful, and can provide different sensory experiences, eg different stones, shells, textured brick, fencing, etc.
- Convenient seating, benches and small tables can be a valuable part of the sensory garden. To be able to sit and rest with a stimulating vista or view close at hand is valuable. Space benches to accommodate wheelchairs and allow friends to sit side by side.

Another Sense – The Sense of Humour

Don't forget to add a little sense of humour to your sensory garden. You could add funny garden signs, statues, sculptures, and containers.

Pause & Ponder

- What are the things you would put in your sensory garden that relate to each of the five senses?
- How would you add a sense of humour?



Keeping Sensory Gardens Simple

A sensory garden can be as simple as ...

- A group of flowerpots filled with herbs and arranged on some decking or by the porch.
- A window box or a tub on a patio, filled with a tomato plant and at the right level so a visitor can reach it.
- A hanging basket, hung inside or outside. On a simple pulley, it can be lowered into the lap of a person in a wheelchair. The basket can be planted with quick-growing seeds and bulbs, or it can be instantly transformed with ready-grown plants of many colours, smells, and textures.
- A pot of soil and a single seed.

Nancy has very limited movements, but she likes to point her finger. It gives her great pleasure to poke her finger into a pot of moist soil and then watch a plump seed drop in the hole. Nancy is a valued member of the gardening club at her care home, using her greatest skill – ‘one-finger planting’.

Indoor Sensory Gardens

Sometimes gardening outdoors presents greater challenges than the staff or the residents are prepared to handle. Weather extremes, insect stings and bites, dehydration, allergies, injury risks, seasonal limitations, and many other factors can all be problems. An indoor sensory garden can be the answer.

A conservatory, atrium, entrance hall, or even a windowsill can be a great location for a year-round indoor sensory garden. A tabletop water fountain, a planter filled with herbs, a pot of seasonal tulips, and a branch of autumn leaves can all be part of an indoor sensory garden. You can then add some comfortable seating and a recording of nature sounds or bird sounds to add to the atmosphere.

Portable Indoor Sensory Gardens

A sensory garden can be as simple as a trolley filled with colourful plants. Sensory garden trolleys can easily accommodate a wide variety of herbs, flowers, textures, and colours in a relatively small space.

In one care home, a couple of residents from the Gardening Club set up their own 'Visiting Garden' on a trolley. Their goal was to plant and care for this sensory garden themselves, and take it from room to room to visit the less mobile residents. "It'll give them something to talk about besides their aches and pains," they said.

The Visiting Garden became the high point of the day for many of the bedbound and less mobile individuals, some of whom had never done any gardening before. When it wasn't traveling from room to room, the trolley was parked in the hallway where people were encouraged to 'scratch and sniff' as they passed.



Things you might include on your sensory garden trolley:

- A variety of houseplants with different textures and colours
- Blooming plants, eg African violets, small geraniums, blooming bulbs
- Containers of fresh flowers
- Twigs and leaves
- Baskets of fresh fruits, vegetables, berries, and nuts
- A wind chime dangling from a canopy or handle
- Gardening hand tools
- Gardening gloves
- Watering can
- Packets of seeds

Quick Summary

- A sensory garden does not have to be an outdoor garden. You can have an indoor sensory garden in a conservatory, entrance hall, or even on a windowsill.
- A sensory garden can be as simple as a few flowerpots, a hanging basket, or a single pot and some seeds.
- A sensory garden can also be on wheels – a sensory garden trolley.

Horticultural Therapy – Sensory Circle

Some Background

Sensory stimulation can be a valuable part of an overall activity programme and is a key part of a horticultural therapy programme. This sensory stimulation can be provided in two forms:

Multi-sensory stimulation (MSS) presents the individual or group with a 'bouquet' of stimuli, such as a vase of flowers with various forms, scents, colours, and textures. You can also add music, poetry, pictures, photographs and conversation to supplement the plant materials. Different stimuli may trigger a response in different individuals.



Sequential sensory stimulation (SSS) is usually more appropriate for Alzheimer's and dementia patients. In this case, the goal is to present one stimulus at a time, adding others as you go. For example, a red geranium provides visual impact, and then the nose can take over, followed by the touch of a leaf or flower on the cheek (often far more sensitive than the fingers in the elderly).

What is a Sensory Circle?

Not all horticultural activities involve planting or caring for plants. A sensory circle is a no-dirt approach to presenting horticultural therapy where plant-related items (often based on a theme) are used for stimulation and to evoke memories.

You can use the sensory circle approach with individuals who are unable to do actual planting projects or who cannot care for a plant. The approach is very effective with people suffering from Alzheimer's. You can also use it when there is simply no space for ongoing gardening projects. Therefore, the sensory circle approach can be used with **any** group, impaired or not.

What Do You Need for a Sensory Circle?

The materials in a sensory circle will change with the season, geography, resources, and the residents' needs and limitations. Try to have some variation on the following for each session:

1. Colour from a familiar plant, such as a red geranium, a rose, daisy or poinsettia. A familiar plant will get the conversation going.
2. An aromatic plant or flower.
3. A fruit, tuber, seed, or nut that can be a springboard for discussion – apples, blackberries, pine cones, acorns, walnuts, peanuts, etc.

4. Tactile stimulation in the form of the fruit or succulent foliage – like the jade plant, or the velvet texture of lamb’s ears.
5. An exotic plant or plant-related materials that are uncommon, unfamiliar, and possibly just downright weird! The presentation of something new provides a learning experience, mental stimulation, and a topic of conversation.
6. Something humorous or whimsical – like a funny container or plant pet. Have you ever planted something in a shoe?
7. Something to taste that relates to at least one of the items showcased. For example, you could serve pineapple juice with a pineapple project.



Often one item will satisfy more than one of the above categories.

The experience is most successful when the items are related in some way. For example, for a ginger project, you might bring in a ginger plant, ginger root, ground ginger, gingerbread man, gingerbread house, etc.

You can use far more than plants and botanical materials. The possibilities are limitless. You can incorporate music, artwork, photos, humour, trivia, opinion polls and stories to provide increased sensory stimulation and involvement.

How to Present a Sensory Circle

Each item is passed around the group, allowing plenty of time for individual responses and social interaction. You would usually progress from the most common and universally familiar to the more exotic, but this can change depending on your group.

Try to spread out the materials, one at a time, on a white or pale blue background for the most effective colour contrast. Whether you use MMS or SSS will depend on who is in your group.

There is no definitive number of materials you should use, as it is important to give the residents time to respond as fully as they wish. Sometimes you may get stuck on just one item. This is okay. Times like this can be the most fun and most productive of sessions, when the residents begin to engage, socialise, and laugh.

What to do during the activity

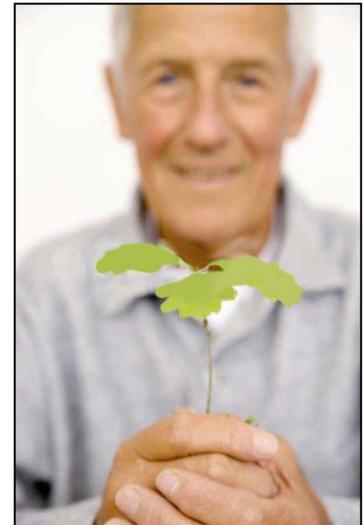
- Discuss the colour of the plant. You could play ‘name that colour’ with a flower that has an

unusual colouring or shade.

Gladys hadn't spoken for three months after her stroke. She was depressed and reluctant to engage in the therapies that would put her on the road to recovery. When the horticultural therapist held a red geranium before her, she smiled and reached out to touch it.

When he asked her what colour geraniums she liked best, she paused for a long moment. Then she hesitantly answered, "Red." She took part in the potting of some geranium cuttings and became an increasingly active member of the Gardening Club. The connection with the plant was her incentive, and she progressed rapidly after that.

- Encourage people to feel and smell each item.
"Does it feel soft or hard?"
"Does the smell remind you of anything?"
"If you closed your eyes, would you be able to tell what it is?"
- Encourage people to share stories and memories.
- Share some trivia and information about the plant or plant-related items.
- Share a snack or drink.



Tips for the sensory circle

- The sensory circle approach works best with a small group.
- Don't try to cover too much material. This can cause confusion and may be too much of a challenge for some.
- Keep it short. Aim for 30–45 minutes.
- Consider safety. If a person cannot swallow, don't serve them apple slices. Always check with care staff before serving anything.
- Engage the participants in the activities as much as possible.
- Go with the flow and just adapt the session if it goes in a completely different direction to what was planned.
- Remember it is about the people, not the plants.
- Don't forget to add a little humour.

Quick Summary

- The sensory circle approach is used with people who can't participate in traditional gardening activities, such as planting and plant care. It is often used with people with Alzheimer's.
- It can also be used in homes and centres where there is no space for a traditional gardening activity, or with people who are not impaired.
- Items are selected for a sensory circle for their colour, aroma, feel and taste.
- Unusual or exotic plants or items can add a learning element to a sensory circle.
- Don't forget to add a little humour.

Pause & Ponder

- What do MMS and SSS stand for?
- What is the difference between the two approaches?

Final Thought

To stroll through a garden is to soothe the troubled soul, lose the accumulated stress of daily life, exercise the body, and stimulate the mind. Without us having to do any scientific research or complicated experiments, we can understand why it works. Just think about the way walking outside refreshes you, or how seeing nature bloom into spring lifts your spirits. Gardens can improve many people's lives. Indeed, even if it is only to help relax and unwind, they can improve **any** person's life.

"A garden makes all our senses swim with pleasure."

William Lawson

Additional Resources

- **Thrive** – a charity ‘using gardening to change lives’. They provide advice and guidance on using gardening for health and well-being, especially aimed at those living with disabilities or ill health, or those who are isolated, disadvantaged or vulnerable. They have various online resources, a free online ‘Gardening Club’ and offer training courses on social and therapeutic horticulture (STH).
<https://www.thrive.org.uk>
- Dementia-friendly **gardening worksheets** from Thrive.
<http://dementiagarden.org.uk/resources/project-resources/>
- **RHS information** about potentially harmful garden plants. (*See Plant Safety section on next page.*)
<https://www.rhs.org.uk/advice/profile?pid=524>

Plant Safety

While it is true that some plants, or at least some parts of plants, are toxic, most don't pose a threat. The actual number of people who adversely react to plants that are considered dangerous is very small. Fatalities are extremely rare and usually connected with other health problems. That being said, it is important to have an awareness of plant safety so that you can avoid, or at least be on alert to, anything that is likely to pose a threat.

Some plants can cause a skin reaction, such as inflammation, rash, or itching. Others can cause an allergic reaction for some people and not for others. As far as poisoning from plants goes, the risk is far greater from the cleaning products commonly found in every home.

Having said that, people on medication, those suffering from illness or disease, or children and senior citizens may react differently to a healthy adult. Some supposedly 'safe' plants can cause an allergic reaction or react with medications, so take care and observe closely until you are certain that there are no problems.

Only plants that are known to be edible should be consumed, and even then, only in limited quantities until you are certain that there isn't going to be any reaction. Never eat any flowers or leaves that have been sprayed with fertilisers or pesticides. If you aren't certain, please don't take the risk.

Warning! *No matter how safe the plant is, the use of pesticides and many of the commonly available plant foods can render the garden dangerous.*

There are various ways that a plant can be a threat to an individual:

- Some plants have thorns, spines, or sharp points that can cause puncture wounds. These wounds can then be an entry site for infection.
- Some plants, such as stinging nettles or poison ivy, can cause dermatitis, rashes, or an allergic reaction.
- Sometimes problems can come from common fruits and vegetables. Tomato and potato leaves contain solanine which is poisonous. Onions, horseradish, and even chives contain natural chemical compounds that can cause eye inflammation. Mangos and cashews are in the same plant family as poison ivy and some people react to them. Raw cashews are a problem but roasting them dissipates the harmful anacardic acid.
- Many of the plants we commonly grow can be a problem. Azaleas and mountain laurel, delphiniums and lily of the valley, philodendron and tulips all pose a threat if ingested.
- Sometimes a plant or plant part that causes a mild or insignificant reaction in a healthy adult can cause a serious problem in a child, a frail elderly person, or someone with a chronic health condition.
- There can also be the danger from a reaction with medications, chemical sensitivity, or allergy.

When considering the danger, keep in mind that quantity can be a factor. Some plants are used in small amounts as medicinal herbs and can be beneficial in some situations. Just as taking one aspirin can help, but consuming a whole bottle can be dangerous; a small amount of the plant may not be harmful, but a lot might hurt. However, err on the side of caution and contact a medical professional if any amount is ingested.

This section is not meant to scare you, instead, we hope it will help you feel confident that your garden is safe and that you're aware of any possible risks. Always read your plant labels carefully and adhere to your home's health and safety protocols, but please don't feel discouraged from growing plants! We hope you have fun and enjoy your garden.

Please take a look at the RHS list of potentially harmful garden plants so you can be aware of what to avoid.

Potentially harmful garden plants – <https://www.rhs.org.uk/advice/profile?pid=524>