

Growing Guide: Sensory Garden Plants

The plant kingdom offers such a wealth of sensory opportunities. Plants come in all sorts of shapes, colors, sizes, with seemingly infinite fragrances and tastes. However, not all plants are good choices for a sensory garden — some of the most beautiful are the most toxic, and some invite a closer look only to snag you with a thorn. Following are some good options for your garden. They're divided into the five sense categories, but there's much overlap among them.



Look at Me!

The first sense impression of a garden is usually sight, and in this domain plants are an especially rich source of variation in size, shape, color, and visual texture. Plants in hot colors — reds, yellows, oranges — draw the eye and bring energy to a garden spot. Cool colors, on the other hand, tend to recede and calm, making them an ideal backdrop for a quiet seating area. Large plants inspire awe; small plants invite close examination. Here are some eye-pleasing plants.

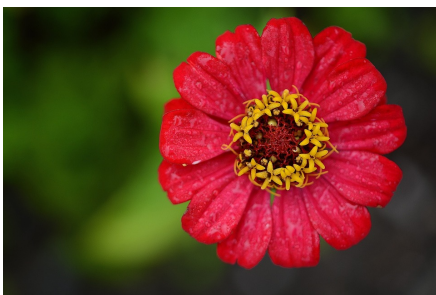
Annuals

Sunflowers

This kid favorite is a must-have in any school garden. There are so many types to choose from, from 1' high dwarf varieties perfect for edging a bed, to those that grow 10' or taller that are ideal for making a sunflower house (<https://kidsgardening.org/garden-activities-plant-a-sunflower-house/>). You can purchase seeds for pollen-less varieties that are less likely to attract bees (however, the seeds tend to be more expensive than other varieties). More info: [Growing Guide: Sunflowers](#)

Signet Marigold (*Tagetes tenuifolia*; also called *T. signata*)

Varieties include those with yellow, orange, and red flowers. Petals are edible. Note: Prolonged contact with flowers can cause minor skin irritation. Learn more about the plant here: [Growing Guide: Edible Flowers](#)



Zinnia (*Zinnia* spp.)

These reliable bloomers are easy to grow from seed. Common zinnia (*Z. elegans*) produces large, showy blooms in a rainbow of hues. Bright colors include hot pink, yellow, red, and orange, as well as some bi-colors; more subtle hues include pale yellow, white, lavender, and green. Start seeds indoors or purchase plants and set them out after all danger of frost is past.

Calendula (*Calendula officinalis*)

Flower colors include golden-yellow, orange, and red. Petals are edible; calendula is sometimes referred to as "poor man's saffron." Also called pot marigold. Learn more about the plant here: [Growing Guide: Edible Flowers](#)

Snapdragons (*Antirrhinum multiflorum*)

Stately spires in a spectrum of both bold and subtle colors are an eye-catching addition to the garden. And children of all ages love to pinch the sides of the blooms to open the "dragon's" mouth. The

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seeds are very small and need to be started indoors 10-12 weeks before planting outdoors, so it's easiest to purchase transplants.

Canna Lily (*Canna generalis*)

These bold beauties grow from rhizomes that can be left in the ground in USDA Zones 7-10. In colder zones they need to be dug up and stored in a protected place each winter. The plants form impressively large leaves and tall flower spikes. Some varieties' leaves have interesting variegation.

Bright Lights Swiss Chard (or similar variety)

Multicolor stems in vibrant pink, yellow, magenta, red, and orange carry aloft the large green leaves. Learn more about the plant here: [Growing Guide: Swiss Chard](#)

Perennials

Pink Muhlygrass (*Muhlenbergia capillaries*)

This well-behaved native grass forms an attractive clump that stays put — it doesn't spread aggressively like some grasses. A perennial, it's hardy in zones 5-10 and grows about 3' tall and wide. In spring and summer, the dark green, strappy leaves form an attractive mound. Come late summer, the real show begins as masses of billowing pink flower plumes float and sway above the foliage, continuing into fall. The flower stems are nice additions to late summer bouquets and dried arrangements.

Touch me!

These are "hands-on" plants — offering a surprising variety of textures and surfaces, some begging to be caressed, others offering a more "pointed" experience. In addition to plants, you can display rough pieces of bark, river-smoothed stones, pinecones, moss-covered branches, and other natural materials to expand this touch-sense opportunity.

Annuals

Chenille Plant (*Acalypha hispida*)

The flowers of this delightful plant droop in fuzzy pendants up to 18" long that just beg to be touched. The plant grows quite large — 4-6' tall and wide, so give it plenty of space in a place where visitors can reach to caress the distinctive blooms. It's hardy only to zones 10-11, so it's usually grown as an annual.



Celosia (*Celosia* spp.)

There are numerous types of this common garden annual, all with showy blooms in an astonishing range of shapes and colors. Feather celosias produce fluffy, upright plumes. Wheat celosias have more compact, spiky flowers. Cockscomb celosias have velvety blooms that resemble brains! You can start seeds indoors about 8 weeks before your last spring frost, or purchase transplants.

Strawflower (*Xerochrysum bracteatum*)

This easy-to-grow plant has fascinating flowers. They resemble daisies, with a central yellow disk surrounded by petals. But these petals are actually bracts, and they're glossy, stiff, and papery — an unexpected texture compared to the usual soft, velvety daisy petals. The flowers are also called everlastings, alluding to their use in long-lasting dried flower arrangements. Start the seeds indoors 6-8 weeks before your average last frost date or use purchased transplants. Set these tender plants out after the last frost date.

Bunny Tail Ornamental Grass (*Lagurus ovatus*)

A compact grass that grows just 12-18" high, this plant is covered with irresistibly fluffy seed-heads held high above the strappy leaves.

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Caress the seed-heads in the garden, and cut some for dried arrangements. Sow seeds indoors about 8 weeks before your last frost date, keeping the pots in a cool (55 degree) location. The seeds are slow to germinate — taking up to three weeks! — so be patient. If you can find transplants of this charming grass, that's the easiest route. Wait until after your last frost date to plant outdoors.

Perennials

Lamb's Ear (*Stachys byzantina*)

Thick, velvety leaves are soft as can be and irresistible to touch and caress. The gray-green leaves are covered with fine fuzz (especially the new growth) that makes them appear white when viewed from some angles, giving them visual appeal as well. This no-fuss perennial is hardy in zones 4-8. It tolerates poor soils; in rich soils it can spread somewhat aggressively.

Hens and Chicks (*Sempervivum tectorum*)

Several different plants go by the common name hens and chicks. Here we're talking about the perennial plant that's hardy in zones 3-8 and goes by another common name, houseleek. With perfectly symmetrical rosettes of fleshy leaves with pointy tips and a fun name, these plants invite gazing and touching. The "mother" hen forms offshoots (her chicks), so that in time they form a low, dense, 4" high mat. In summer the plants send up flower stalks.

Smell Me!

Our minds are so tuned into smells that one whiff of a fragrance can call up memories from events long ago. Including plants with a variety of scents in your sensory garden offers visitors the opportunity to explore the incredible variety of fragrances plants offer — and perhaps they'll begin creating their own olfactory memories!

Annuals/Tender Perennials

Basil (*Ocimum basilicum*)

Ubiquitous in a wide range of cuisines, basil is an easy-to-grow annual that thrives in the heat of summer. Leaves may be green or purple, frilly or smooth, large or tiny. Fragrance varies, too, with undertones that include licorice, lemon, lime, clove, and more, depending on the variety. Just brushing by the plant releases the scent; plucking a leaf and rubbing it really releases the fragrant oils. Start seeds indoors 6 weeks before your last frost date or purchase transplants. Basil won't tolerate chilly temperatures; set plants out a week after your last frost date and cover plant if temperatures drop into the high 50s. More info: [Growing Guide: Basil](#)

Pineapple Sage (*Salvia elegans*)

This fragrant plant is a perennial in zones 8-10; in colder zones it's easily grown as an annual. A shrubby plant that grows up to 3' tall with brilliant scarlet flowers, it's a dramatic addition to the garden. But there's more to it than meets the eye: Pluck a leaf and crush it, and savor the luscious pineapple scent. Pineapple sage is easiest to grow from purchased plants. Grow it in a pot and it can be overwintered indoors.

Curry Plant (*Helichrysum italicum*)

The gray-green foliage somewhat resembles that of the lavender plant, but that's where the resemblance ends. Instead of the sweetly herbaceous scent of crushed lavender leaves, the foliage of curry plant, when crushed, gives off a strong and distinctive scent of curry spices (though the plant isn't actually used to make curry). It's hardy in zones 7-10; elsewhere it's grown as an annual. It grows 2-3' tall and wide and requires excellent drainage.

Chocolate Cosmos (*Cosmos atrosanguineus*)

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Unlike its annual cousins with pink and white flowers, chocolate cosmos is a tender perennial hardy in zones 7-9. In colder regions, it can be grown as an annual or the tubers can be lifted and stored indoors over the winter. The plant grows about 2' high, and produces abundant brown-red flowers with a fun and unexpected chocolate scent. Cut some stems for an indoor bouquet with a delightful chocolately aroma!

Scented Geraniums (*Pelargonium* spp.)

Not to be confused with the showy red-, pink-, and white-flowered geraniums found in window boxes and planters nationwide, scented geraniums offer their gifts in a far more subtle fashion. The flowers, in shades of pink, lavender, and white, are borne in small, unimpressive clusters. It's the leaves that really set this plant apart. Different species have wildly different scents when their leaves are rubbed or crushed: rose, apple, pine, coconut, lemon, peppermint. Purchase scented geraniums as plants; seeds are difficult to find and may not produce the desired scent. The plants are hardy only to zone 10; elsewhere, they can be overwintered indoors. Note: Prolonged contact with foliage may cause mild skin irritation. Avoid ingesting leaves; the essential oils they contain are toxic if eaten in large quantities.



Mints (*Mentha* spp.)

Trying growing a peppermint plant and a chocolate mint plant in a large pot. Pluck a leaf from each plant, rub them together and sniff — peppermint patties! There are many other types of mints, too: apple mint, Mints are notorious for spreading aggressively in a garden so be sure to confine them to a pot.)

Taste me!

Depending on the design of your garden space and your intended clientele, it might be best to group all the “tasting” plants together to eliminate confusion about what’s okay to sample. Here are a few suggestions for plants; additional options include basil and other culinary herbs and any garden vegetable.

Alpine Strawberry (*Fragaria* spp.)

Unlike their big-fruited, June-bearing cousins, alpine strawberries produce small berries intermittently throughout the summer. Searching for the little berries is like a treasure hunt! And what a treasure they are — the small berries pack a big flavor punch. Alpine strawberries are easiest to grow from plants rather than from seeds. They produce tidy mounds of foliage and are remarkably rugged and adaptable. They're hardy in zones 5-9.



Stevia (*Stevia rebaudiana*)

This tender perennial, hardy only to zone 10, grows into a rangy shrub and doesn't offer much in the ornamental category; its intrigue is revealed when you pluck and chew a leaf. It takes a few seconds and then... wow! Sweet! (You can spit out the chewed leaf or eat it.) Considered 200 times sweeter than cane sugar by weight, stevia, aptly dubbed sweetleaf, offers a special taste experience that's rare among commonly grown plants.

Of course plants that are commonly grown in a vegetable garden are naturals for stimulating the “taste” sense. Here are a just a few to consider.

Edibles that can be eaten straight from the garden:

Cucumber: Look for “bush” varieties, or grow vining types on a trellis.

Tomato: Consider small-fruited, compact varieties.

Swiss chard

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Lettuce
Spinach

Peppers — *Note of caution:* Some “ornamental” peppers produce small, candy-colored fruits that are *extremely* hot and spicy. Check plant descriptions carefully. ‘Tangerine Dream’ and ‘Pretty N Sweet’ are two ornamental pepper varieties with mild-flavored fruit.

Roots to be harvested and washed before eating:

Radishes
Carrots

Edible flowers, such as nasturtiums and marigolds:

Growing Guide: Edible Flowers <https://kidsgardening.org/growing-guide-edible-flowers/>

Trees and shrubs (type depends on growing zone):

Blueberries
Apples
Pears
Citrus

Listen to Me!

If you listen closely, most gardens offer a symphony of sounds. Some can be startling, like the thrumming of a hummingbird’s wings as it darts by. Some are insistent, like the song of the cicada or the chirping of crickets. Bird feeders, birdbaths, and insect houses can lure a variety of wildlife to bring natural music to your garden. Water features, such as a softly flowing fountain, can provide a soothing backdrop; perhaps punctuated by the sound of bamboo or metal chimes. The following plants bring their own songs to the symphony.



Love-in-a-Mist (*Nigella damascena*)

These seedpod rattles start out in summer as sky-blue flowers nestled in the feathery foliage. Later, the flowers transform into large, egg-shaped pods with elongated “horns” that bring additional visual intrigue. Then listen closely as you shake a seedpod and the seeds rattle inside. The annual plant prefers cool weather, so sow seeds in spring as soon as the ground can be worked. Unlike most annuals, you’ll want to skip deadheading the flowers, so they can form those wonderful seedpods.



Money Plant (*Lunaria annua*)

In its first year, this biennial produces an unobtrusive mound of green foliage. The following spring, pretty lavender-purple flowers bloom on tall stems. Then the real magic happens: The flowers transform into large, paper-thin, silver-white, translucent discs that flutter and rattle in the breeze. The plant is also known as the silver dollar plant and, curiously, the honesty plant. It freely self-sows — those feather-light discs are carried on the breeze, and wherever they land you’ll have another plant, so some consider this plant a bit weedy. Learn to recognize the seedlings so you can pull them, if desired. Hardy in

zones 5-9.

Lesser Quaking Grass (*Briza minor*)

This easy-to-grow annual grass produces slim stems topped with flowers that mature into flattened seed heads. As its name implies, the wiry stems sway readily in the breeze, setting the dangling seed heads a-fluttering and rustling like quaking aspen leaves. The seed heads make interesting additions to dried

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flower arrangements, too. The plant grows about 12' high. NOTE: This annual quaking grass's perennial cousins, *Briza media* and *Briza maxima*, are listed as invasive in some parts of the country.

Gourds

Shake a dried gourd and the seeds rattle inside — playful percussion for your garden symphony. Gourds grow on rambling vines that are best trained to a structure, such as a trellis. Grow them up and over an arbor or arch to create a comforting transition into the garden space — as long as it doesn't obscure the garden layout, which should be relatively open so visitors can survey the space prior to entering.

Trees

In larger gardens, trees — especially “weeping” varieties with arching branches — offer a variety of soothing sounds when a breeze blows through. Examples include willow, birch, and quaking aspen. In fall, dried leaves rustle on the branches and, when they fall, crunch underfoot. Hardiness varies.

Bamboo

The rustling of bamboo in the breeze adds another sound dimension. If you choose to plant bamboo, be cautious when selecting a variety. Look for “clumping” types that will form an orderly mound. Stay away from “runners” that can quickly overtake an entire garden and beyond and, once established, are nearly impossible to eliminate. Clumping bamboos include *Fargesia robusta* (zones 7-9, 12' tall) and *Thamnocalamus tessellates* (zones 7-9, 15' tall).

Ornamental Grasses

There are many annual and perennial grasses that will add swaying motion and gentle sound to a garden. Research carefully before purchasing. Some grasses commonly sold are on invasive species lists. For example, widely planted pampas grasses (*Cortaderia* spp.) are non-native grasses that have spread by seed and become invasive in many regions. (The leaf blades have knife-sharp edges; another reason not to plant it in your sensory garden!)

BE PREPARED: Even plants such as these, deemed safe for a sensory garden, should not be eaten unless they're clearly an edible — a tomato fruit or basil leaf. Note that many other readily available and commonly grown garden plants are toxic: datura and foxglove, for example. And even tomato leaves can be toxic if eaten in large quantities.

It's always a good idea to clearly label your plants. Visitors will learn the name of the plant, and it can be useful information in case something is consumed that shouldn't be.

Keep the Poison Control phone number handy and don't hesitate to call them if you suspect a garden visitor has ingested something questionable. Try to have the name of the plant and the approximate amount ingested. Here is their contact information:

Poison Control
1-800-222-1222
<https://www.poison.org>

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