

Sensory Gardening with Kids

Activity Kit

What is a Sensory Garden?

Gardening is a 'sense-sational' way to engage kids in outdoor learning and play! With their incredible diversity of shapes, sizes, colors, scents, and textures, plants offer limitless options for designing a garden space to engage all the senses.



ABOUT KIDSGARDENING

For 40 years, KidsGardening has led the youth gardening movement by creating opportunities for kids to play, learn, and grow through gardening. The national nonprofit provides grant funding, inspiration, community connections, and original educational resources to reach more than 3 million kids each year. Learn more at [KidsGardening.org](https://www.KidsGardening.org).

Design a Sensory Garden

CHOOSE APPROPRIATE AND ACCESSIBLE PLANT BEDS AND CONTAINERS

Engaging in the space is key for kids to get the most out of their sensory garden. Raised beds, containers set on tables, or vertical gardens bring plants up from the ground to waist- or face-level for children, allowing them to get up close and personal with plants. If you choose to use in-ground or raised beds, make sure they are not too wide, and consider adding pathways to help your younger gardeners explore. Don't forget that indoor gardens under grow lights or in bright window light are an option, too.

SELECT SENSE-ENGAGING PLANTS

Choose plants known for engaging the senses, but also make sure they are well adapted to your existing growing conditions so that your garden can be as easy to maintain as possible.

KEEP SAFETY IN MIND

Since a sensory garden encourages kids to smell, taste, and touch, make sure to avoid using poisonous plants or plants with foliage or thorns that may irritate or puncture skin. Group edible plants in one spot to make sure it is clear which ones can be consumed.

DRESS UP THE GARDEN WITH FUN ACCESSORIES

Add sound by making your own wind chimes from old silverware or install a small water-gurgling fountain. Add texture with different types of paving stones and seating areas made of a variety of natural and man-made materials. Add visual appeal with brightly colored signs and sculptures.

EMBRACE EXPLORATION

Remember exploration is your goal. Sensory garden plants may get a little bit more picking and prodding than those in some other types of gardens, but that is all part of the experience. Make sure your young gardeners feel free to interact with the plants and special features in your garden.



Photo Courtesy of Paulding County Master Gardener Extension Volunteers

Sensory Garden Plants to Consider



LOOK AT ME!

The first sense impression of a garden is usually sight. Plants are an especially rich source of variation in size, shape, color, and visual texture. Here are some eye-pleasing plants.

TIP! Remember that seeds can be visually engaging too! Seeds like scarlett runner beans can be a fun visual exploration before the garden is up for the year.

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 that are ideal for making a sunflower house.



Zinnia

These reliable bloomers are easy to grow from seed. Zinnias produce large, showy blooms in a rainbow of bright hues (hot pink, yellow, red, orange, and some bi-colors), and subtle hues (pale yellow, white, lavender, and green).



Bright Lights Swiss Chard

Multicolor stems in vibrant pink, yellow, magenta, red, and orange carry aloft the large green leaves.



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 kids the opportunity to explore the incredible variety of fragrances plants offer.

Basil

Basil 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.



Pineapple Sage

This fragrant plant is a perennial in warm climates and an annual in cooler climates. A shrubby plant that grows up to 3' tall with brilliant scarlet flowers, it's a dramatic addition to the garden. Pluck a leaf and crush it, and savor the luscious pineapple scent.



Chocolate Cosmos

Unlike its annual cousins with pink and white flowers, chocolate cosmos is a tender perennial. 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.





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.

TIP! 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.

Celosia

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!



Strawflower

This easy-to-grow plant has flowers resembling daisies, with a central yellow disk surrounded by petals. But these petals are actually bracts that are glossy, stiff, and papery — an unexpected texture compared to the usual soft, velvety daisy petals.



Lamb's Ear

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.



TASTE ME!

Depending on the design of your garden space and the maturity of your young gardeners, 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 (although there are many, many other culinary herbs and garden vegetables available).

Mints

Try growing a peppermint and a chocolate mint plant. Pluck a leaf of each and rub them together — peppermint patties! There are many other types of mints: apple, pineapple and spearmint, just to name a few. Be sure to confine these notorious spreaders to a pot.



Alpine Strawberry

Unlike their big-fruited 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.



Stevia

Chew on a leaf of this tender perennial and you will realize why it is also known as sweetleaf. Considered 200 times sweeter than cane sugar by weight, stevia offers a special taste experience that's rare among plants.



Nasturtium

Both the leaves and flowers of nasturtiums are edible, with a pleasantly peppery taste. Scatter them as a colorful accent in salads, atop frosted cakes, anywhere a little color is needed. Easy to grow, choose from vining varieties or compact, mounding varieties.





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

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 visual intrigue. Listen closely as you shake a seedpod and the seeds create music inside.



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.



Ornamental Grasses

There are many annual and perennial grasses that will add swaying motion and gentle sound to a garden. Two grasses that offer kid fun include: Bunny Tail and Pink Muhlygrass.

Bunny Tail ornamental grass is a compact grass covered with irresistibly fluffy seed-heads held high above the strappy leaves. In addition to listening to the blades sway in the wind, kids can caress the seed-heads in the garden, and cut some for dried arrangements.



Pink Muhlygrass is a well-behaved native grass that forms an attractive clump that stays put — it doesn't spread aggressively like some grasses. Come late summer, the real show begins as masses of billowing pink flower plumes float and sway above the foliage, continuing into fall.



PLANT SAFETY!

Even plants such as these, deemed safe for a sensory garden, should not be eaten unless they're edible. If you have very young children, you may want to avoid plants with poisonous parts.

Sensory Garden Activities

Still working on planting your sensory garden space?
Here are five gardening activities you can do with or without a garden!



LOOK AT ME: COLOR SCAVENGER HUNT

Make a rainbow color key to aid in a fun scavenger hunt in your garden. Turn it into a game, and see who can find an example of each color first!



Materials:

- Small squares of paper such as construction paper, cardstock or paint chip samples from a home improvement store
- A metal ring or piece of string/ribbon

Directions:

Cut a variety of colors of paper into small, similar-sized pieces. Punch a hole in one corner and then tie together using a metal ring or piece of string/ribbon. Take your rainbow color key with you to a garden or a nearby natural area and begin your search for matching plants and objects. As you explore, engage kids in talking about the wide variety of hues found in nature. To add to the challenge for older kids, make sure to include different shades of the same color. For example, include 10 different shades of green to fine tune their observation skills as they search for the subtle differences among leaf color.



TASTE ME: HERBAL TEA PARTY

Sampling herbal teas can be a fun and refreshing way to explore the power of herbs.



Materials:

- Fresh or dried herbs from the garden or grocery store (ideas include bee balm, borage, cinnamon basil, chamomile, fennel, lemon balm, mint, and sage)
- Tea strainer
- Tablespoon and cup measure
- Boiling water and tea pot
- Heat resistant cups to drink from

Directions:

Chop fresh herbs or snip them with scissors to help release the essential oils. Crumble dried herbs gently, just so they're big enough that they won't slip through the strainer. Measure herbs. One tablespoon of dried herb or three of fresh makes one eight-ounce cup of tea. Pour boiling water over the herbs, cover, and let steep for one to three minutes (don't add too much time, extra time releases more tannic acid from plants, which can upset the stomach). Unlike black and green teas, herb teas are naturally pale. Enjoy your tasty creation!



TOUCH ME: MYSTERY BOX

Plants provide a range of visual textures from fine (generally created by smaller-leaved plants) to coarse (larger-leaved plants). You can also find a variety of tactile textures, from smooth (magnolia leaves) and soft (lamb's ear) to rough (cucumber leaves).



Materials:

- 4 or 5 old shoe boxes or brown paper bags
- Scissors
- 4 or 5 leaves with different textures (gather 2 of each type of leaf)

Directions:

Collect samples of leaves with varying visual and tactile textures, making sure to avoid poisonous plants or those prone to irritate the skin. Cut a small hole that is just the right size for a child's hand to enter out of the top of each shoe box or on the side of your paper bags. Place one leaf in each bag and hide their twins for now.

Encourage kids to explore the textures of the leaves inside (no peaking!) and ask them to list 3 adjectives to describe each one (you can write it down or ask them to do it). After they have examined each sample, bring out the leaf pairs. Ask them to place each leaf by the mystery box/bag where they think the matching leaf is hiding. Once they have made their guesses, open the boxes/bags and see how many they got right.



LISTEN TO ME: GARDEN JOURNAL

Gardens are full of life, and sounds abound, although many times we are too busy and loud to notice. Sounds are made as the wind moves plants and accessories like wind chimes. Insects, birds, and other animals add their chirpings and movement. Water frequently drips and flows through the garden from rain, fountains, and irrigation. Encourage kids to slow down and focus on the music of the garden by writing in a garden journal.



Materials:

- Garden journal and pencil
- A place to sit

Directions:

With journal and writing implement in hand, find a comfortable place to sit in the garden. Ask kids to close their eyes for 1 minute, then open them and write down everything they heard (or draw pictures). The time can vary depending on the developmental level of your young gardeners. Setting a timer can help with patience and focus. Repeat as many times as desired or as long as attention span allows.



SMELL ME: SCENT JARS

Aromas evoke memories and affect moods. Create scent jars using plant-derived materials found in your garden or kitchen and see if kids can match that scent.



Materials:

- Small bottles or plastic containers with lids. If clear, cover the containers with paper to hide what they contain. Poke a hole in the lid of each jar for easy sniffing for young children.
- Cotton balls
- Different plant-derived aromatic substances for each container. Try vanilla; fresh or dried herbs (basil, cilantro, dill, etc.); rose water or other flower inspired perfumes; cinnamon; cocoa powder; lemon juice or peel; garlic; etc.

Directions:

Prepare your scent jars by putting drops of the liquid on cotton wads and insert into your containers. For solids such as herbs, place under the cotton balls. Line up the aromatic containers on a table or counter and let the games begin. Give kids a chance to carefully smell each one and ask: 1) Do you like that smell? 2) What words would you use to describe it? 3) Does it bring to mind any memory, feeling, or activity? 4) What do you think you are smelling? After smelling the scent in a jar, explore your kitchen or garden until you find its origin.

If kids find any of the scents particularly enjoyable or relaxing (for example if using scents like lavender or lemon balm), hold on to jars and kids can use them to find calm and regulation throughout the day.



Photo Courtesy of Finley Tevlin, Suzy Mayes, and Carol Byron