



The Sensory Garden
By Catherine Moné
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A sensory garden is simply one that is designed to emphasize our five senses: vision, hearing, smell, touch, and taste. For most of us, walking in a spring garden is a well-rounded sensory experience. We see colors, movement from the wind, contrasting textures of plants. We might hear things: birds singing, insects buzzing, something rustling in the leaves. Our sense of smell is piqued by scented flowers and leaves, perhaps gardenias, roses, mints. If we spend time in the garden, our sense of touch is ever present in the feel of moist earth, tender roots, fuzzy or prickly plants, woody or sandy mulches. If the season is right, we might even enjoy a little taste of something we're growing, maybe a strawberry, some young pea leaves, or a beautiful peach.

Many plants have strong sensory qualities, and a garden can provide a sensory symphony. How often do we take these stimuli for granted? To test yourself, walk through a garden (I recommend the Sherwood Demonstration Garden) with a friend, first with your eyes closed. What do you hear? Try it again and limit your sight and hearing. What do you smell? Are the scents more profound or complex when you aren't looking and listening?

Historically, sensory gardens were designed to enhance the experience of individuals who had impaired senses or deep emotional needs for the calming effect of nature. This is still a useful objective, but we need to remember that any of us can benefit from greater attention to and appreciation for the natural world. We receive so much sensory stimulation each day, and this influences our minds, our moods, and our bodies. Imagine creating a garden that provides constant positive sensory experience. You might find yourself spending more time there. You might focus on how you feel, and try to identify how that garden effects your perception of well-being. Sensory gardens are especially useful for children, as they learn to use all their senses to understand the world.

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So, how shall you start? You'll need plants that are water-wise, but strong on color, scent, texture, and taste. You'll want plants that attract birds and insects like butterflies and native bees. Obviously, the plant list for a sensory garden could be quite long, because a good garden is diverse. But let's just look at one plant genus - the salvias (or sages) - and see what a broad offering of experiences can be had in a garden that uses little water, our local soil, and no pesticides.

First, for visuals, try *s. greggii*, sometimes called Autumn Sage, which comes in brilliant red, vermillion, pinks, blue-violet, pastel yellow and bicolor varieties. This durable, low-water plant is not a California native, but is a great addition to any garden, as it attracts hummingbirds and a variety of insects. Or, try *s. apiana* or White Sage. This very-low-water native will grow quite large and have big spikes of white flowers with silvery foliage. Put the two together, and you've created beautiful visual contrast.

For hearing, just sit by your salvia and be very still. It sounds ridiculous, I know, but when the flowers are in bloom, hummingbirds will come close, you'll hear their buzzing wings, and you may hear critters who live under your plants. Close your eyes and listen.

For smell, any salvia will do, but the coastal scrub sage, *s. mellifera* or Black Sage, is highly aromatic, and offers pale blue or lavender flowers. You might grow a *s. clevelandii* or Cleveland Sage and compare the scents.

For touch, try a *s. argentea* or Silver Sage, which has big fuzzy leaves. Compare these with the woody, brittleness of *s. greggii*, or the flower stalks of *s. clevelandii*.

For taste, there's always *s. officinalis* or Culinary Sage. A tiny bite of a leaf is one taste experience, but I recommend you sauté that leaf in a little oil or butter. It's just better that way.

Salvias offer a wonderful base for a sensory garden. From there, you can add low-care plants to suit your fancy. Just remember to spend time in the garden exploring with your senses.

The next public education class offered by Master Gardeners will be on "Control of Invasive and Noxious Weeds in El Dorado County." Time and place is: Saturday, June 2, 9:00 a.m. to noon at the Government Center, Bldg C - Hearing Room, 2850 Fairlane Ct., Placerville.

UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9:00 a.m. to noon, by calling [\(530\) 621-5512](tel:5306215512). Walk-ins are welcome at our office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. The Sherwood Demonstration Garden, 6699 Campus Drive, Placerville, is open Fridays and Saturdays, 9 am to noon. (Note: Folsom Lake College charges \$2.00 for parking – see kiosks).

For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at http://ucanr.edu/master_gardener_e-news. You can also find us on Facebook.