



Sensory Gardening Ideas

Created by Community Integrated
Care in partnership with RSPB

This programme won Care Innovator
Award at the Great British Care Awards 2024.



Introducing Sensory Gardens

Sensory gardens can change lives. That's why Community Integrated Care has teamed up with the RSPB to help make sensory gardens more affordable, more accessible and more fun.

Importantly, as well as transforming wellbeing, these gardens play a vital role in supporting nature.

This simple guide will help you to discover:

Seven incredible sensory plants: These wonderful plants are full of colour and have stunning scents. They are also loved by wildlife too. Planting these will help to attract beautiful bees, birds, butterflies and other insects and wildlife to make your garden their home.

How to develop a simple sensory garden: We'll show you the simple steps to creating a wellbeing-boosting garden that really stimulates the five basic senses of touch, sight, scent, taste, and hearing...

Fantastic crafty ideas: Have fun creating your own lovely items that help welcome nature to your garden, from a bird feeder to a hedgehog house!

“Sensory Gardens Made Simple has changed the lives of the people I support. I encourage you to explore it too.”

Vicky, social care specialist

This publication builds on Community Integrated Care's joint partnership with WWF, National Trust and RSPB to support the Save Our Wild Isles Campaign. This programme saw Community Integrated Care develop a range of resources to empower environmental engagement and action in social care, inspired by Sir David Attenborough's acclaimed series.

This programme was named as Care Innovation of the Year at the Great British Care Awards Scotland and North East event.

Sensory Gardening Ideas

Gardening is so much fun! It can be a great sensory experience, accessible and a way to develop skills, so it's the perfect activity for people who access social care to enjoy.

The Sensory Seven

A great place to start with any gardening project is picking plants to suit your space. Here's seven low maintenance plants to help your project flourish! These plants are easy-to-grow, beautiful, loved by pollinating insects and offer fun sensory opportunities.

Each plant should take no more than 15 minutes a year to look after. All you need to do is water them a little in hot weather and prune annually. They should grow back every year.

Check out our top tips on planting and maintaining each plant – and start picking your faves!



Lavender

Why it's great: This sweet-smelling plant is brilliant for bees. It thrives in dry, poor-quality soil, so is perfect for even the most difficult of gardens.

Top tips: Lavender can grow up to 60cm tall and wide, so it's ideal to fill out your garden. Don't over water. Cut off all ends of the stems in early spring for beautiful new growth.

Marjoram (also known as Oregano)

Why it's great: This is a richly scented plant. It's wonderful in attracting bees and even better for butterflies.

Top tips: Marjoram grows to about 30cm tall, and forms in a tight clump. In spring, cut back all the stems that flowered in the previous year.



Catmint (also known as Nepeta)

Why it's great: Enjoy bright flowers for months on end! It is attractive and easy to grow.

Top tips: This grows as a low, loose mound of foliage about 45cm high. Two common Catmint varieties to explore are Walker's Low and Six Hills Giant.

Let them flower in summer, then cut back to the base in July as they start to go straggly. Don't be afraid to give it a good prune and it will sprout again from the base.

If you can, keep it away from your cats, who'll eat it before it has the chance to flower!



Ben Andrew (rspb-images.com)

Verbena Bonariensis

Why it's great: This plant grows slender wiry stems with clusters of gorgeous lilac flowers. Butterflies love it!

Top tips: Leave the flower heads once bloomed as the finch bird loves to eat the seeds. Those that fall to the ground may germinate and give you new plants. Prune back to the base in early spring.

Helenium

Why it's great: These daisy flowers offer stunning flaming reds and yellows, and grow to 60cm high. They will have the bees flocking.

Top tips: A common variety is Sahin's Early Flowerer, but any will do. Cut back last year's flowering stems in early spring. Water well in hot, dry weather.



Hardy Geraniums

Why it's great: Hardy Geraniums have mounds of lovely leaves about 30-45cm (1-1.5 ft) high and hundreds of large simple flowers in shades of blue, purple and pink. Some flower for weeks and weeks. Bumblebees love buzzing about these!

Top tips: Look for varieties such as Geranium Rozanne, Geranium x Magnificum, Geranium Sanguineum. Most can be cut back straight after flowering and will happily regrow – probably flowering again.

Coneflower (also known as Echinacea Purpurea)

Why it's great: This plant has large flowers with a central spiky cone surrounded by pink petals. Butterflies love them, they are also heat and drought resistant!

Top tips: Once they have finished blooming, you can cut back to ground level over-winter. Or, if you prefer to leave the dried seed heads, they can be cut back in early spring.



Top Tips for Easy Gardening



- Growing plants from seeds can be so much fun and very rewarding. This is a great way to save money and enjoy seeing nature at all stages.
- Caring for plants in pots is often more challenging than growing them in the ground. Don't worry if you can only grow your plants in pots indoors, but if you can, try and put them in your garden space.
- Always read the instructions with your plants or seeds to find out the best way to grow them.
- Avoid flowers with lots of rings of petals – they are called 'doubles' and they often don't have the vital nectar and pollen that insects need.
- Only use peat-free compost – this protects our fragile nature.
- If you are buying your own plants or seeds, the Horticultural Trades Association has a [simple guide](#) on whether they are potentially harmful. This will help you to create a safe sensory garden.

Richard Bowler (rspb-images.com)



How to Create a Sensory Garden

The Basics for Beginners

It doesn't have to be complicated to build a thriving sensory garden! Whether you want to make a sensory oasis in a small area, or transform a whole outdoor space, we have six simple steps for you to consider...

What is a Sensory Garden?

Sensory gardens are simply gardens that have a real focus on stimulating positive experiences through the five basic senses of touch, sight, scent, taste, and hearing.

Sensory spaces are beneficial to everyone – they can be calming, relaxing, fun and interesting. They can be particularly rewarding to people who enjoy greater levels of sensory stimulation.

Get creative and 'grow' a sensory connection with nature!



Step 1: Location

Sensory gardens can be any size – whether you have a small balcony or a bigger garden space, you can creatively bring together nature and sensory pleasures.

Begin by choosing a location that is easily-accessible and safe. It should have level ground and be free from tripping hazards.

You don't have to be outdoors to enjoy a sensory garden. Can you position the garden so that it can be easily seen from the bedroom or living room of the person you support? Think of how lovely it will be for them to see nature from their window or to enjoy the relaxing scents of flowers wafting into their room!

Consider the amount of sunlight and shade in the garden space – try to match your plant choices to this. When you buy plants, they'll often include tags or labels that explain the best type of light for them.



Jargon Buster: Understanding labels



Full Sun: These plants thrive in areas that receive 6–8 hours of direct sunshine, on a nice day.



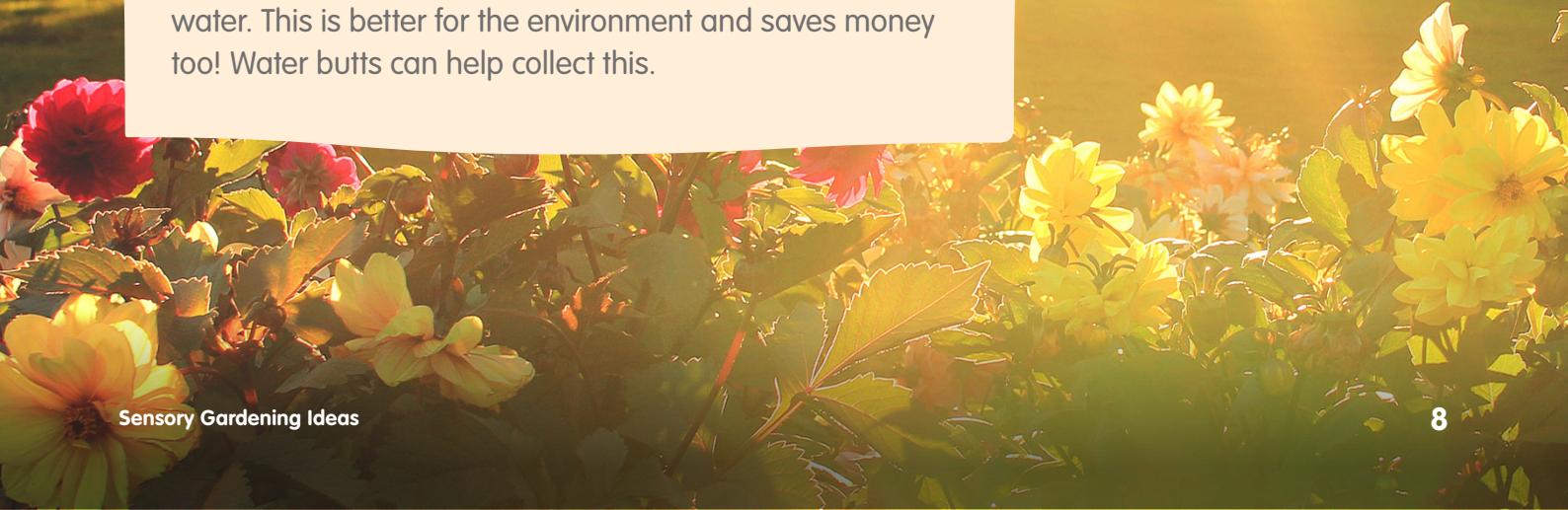
Partial shade: These plants need 4–6 hours of sunshine a day. For example, you might have areas where the plants will be in some shade for part of the day, perhaps as the sun is rising in the morning.



Full shade: These plants thrive without being in direct sunshine for most of the day – perhaps behind trees or in areas where fences block sunlight.

Also consider if your sensory garden area will receive enough rainwater and is accessible, when needed, so that it can be easily watered by the people you support. Is it easy for them to access water and/or use a watering can?

It is brilliant to use harvested rainwater, rather than tap water. This is better for the environment and saves money too! Water butts can help collect this.





Step 2: Planning

Work with the person you support and the important people in their lives to consider what they want and need from their garden.

Do they want a space for relaxation, to explore exciting things – like seeing bees pollinating their plants, or to really enjoy deep sensory stimulation? Think about this before planning your garden to make the space suited to the individual.

Be creative and person-centred, using all the insight that you have about the person you're supporting, to enable them to create a garden that is truly their happy place. For example, if the person you support loves bright colours, that's a fantastic clue that they might want a vibrant and colourful garden!



This planter was created by recycling wooden crates that would otherwise have gone to landfill.

Gardens can – and should – be an expression of personality and interests. Community Integrated Care has many fantastic examples of gardens reflecting the unique characteristics of the people they support – from a bus-themed garden for someone who loves London buses to spaces that celebrate a passion for sport.

Accessibility, as always, is essential. As just one example, consider if you need to add raised containers or beds to promote gardening activities without having to bend or stoop. There are lots of innovative ways that this can be achieved if you are working to a limited budget – for example, lots of Community Integrated Care's services have wheelchair-accessible plant beds that have been made from recycled wooden crates.

And of course, don't forget, you'll want a space to rest and relax! Whether that is a bench, a table and chairs, or simply a space for a nice picnic blanket, think of how you can make a comfy area to enjoy the garden.

Step 3: Plants

The garden should include a mix of plants that together offer a range of textures, colours, and fragrances. Always use peat-free composts for beds and planters, and try to acquire plants grown in peat-free compost as this is kinder to the environment.

Put the person you support in control of their choice of plants – again, enable them to lead their own decisions and try to enable ones that reflect their overall tastes.

The garden can be diverse – blending flowers, herbs, grasses, shrubs and trees. It should stimulate a mix of sensory experiences – this could include combining aromatic plants with ones that have interesting textures, shapes or patterns.

Don't forget, some plants can offer interesting sounds too. For instance, ornamental grasses can sound very relaxing as they gently sway in the summer breeze! The exciting buzz of insects gathering nectar and pollen from your plants is a real treat too.

This website is a fantastic resource to help you choose safe, non-toxic plants: www.hfa.org.uk/potentiallyharmfulplants.



Work with the person you support to consider how they would most enjoy their plants being laid out. Would they welcome an exciting blend of varieties coming together, or would they want their plant choices to be more structured and zoned?

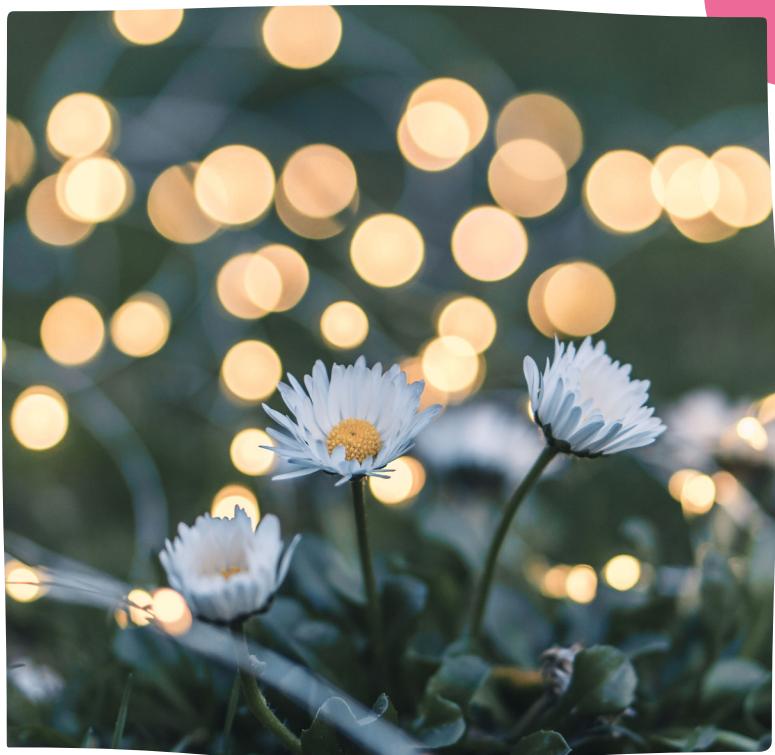
You can empower an understanding of the flowers by adding easy-read labels that share their common names or by adding braille labels, if the person you support has a visual impairment.



Step 4: Features

Include additional features that enhance sensory experiences. Focus on how you can promote people's preferences for the five basic senses of the people you support – touch, sight, scent, taste and hearing – with these additional features and zones.

There are lots of great sensory gardening items available to buy, but you don't always need to purchase expensive, specialist items. Often, everyday items from garden centres, and even cleverly utilised recycled goods, can be as effective as the more expensive specialist resources.



Wind chimes and water features can add calming and interesting sights and sounds. Carefully placed mirrors can create appealing reflections and cascade dappled light that changes throughout the day. Fun objects – from outdoor musical equipment and playsets, to pinwheels that spin in the breeze – can create a sense of excitement and promote engagement.

Solar lights can also be an effective and low-cost way to make the garden even more of a sensory experience. Simply looking out at the beautiful twinkling of fairy lights, as the day draws to a close, can be a relaxing treat.

Natural objects such as well-textured logs or large stones make a great feature and are good for wildlife too.

Of course, we think that one of the best ways to bring sensory pleasure to gardens is through welcoming insects and wildlife. Everyday items like birdbaths and feeders will bring the benefit of seeing nature up close, and add the calming chirps and songs of birds into your outdoor space.

You'll find some great ideas for nature-promoting resources that you can make with the people you support in the final section of this publication.





Step 5: Experience

Sensory gardens are great spaces for active support. Consider how you can facilitate interesting and meaningful moments of sensory connection, by developing activities that promote exploring the environment through touch, smell, sight and listening.

Community Integrated Care has teamed up with RSPB, to create a special [Walking With Nature](#) guide that gives you simple steps on how to promote positive sensory experiences outdoors. This includes sharing key tips for how you can make everyday moments in the garden enriching for the people you support. Download your free copy at www.CommunityIntegratedCare.co.uk/Nature.



Growing your own food can bring exciting opportunities to promote taste, too. If you are looking to do this, we suggest creating separate zoned areas where you can grow herbs, fruits and vegetables, to avoid any confusion with your everyday plants.

One great and cheap way to do this is by purchasing a mini greenhouse – these come in lots of shapes and sizes, and can support the growing of food all year round. If you don't have the space for a greenhouse or wouldn't like to buy one you can also plant lots of delicious, nutritious food and herbs in garden borders and even indoors!

Step 6: Maintenance

The people you support should be empowered to be as in control as they wish of their garden – *it is their space*. There is so much fun to be had and many skills that can be developed with routines like watering the plants, pruning, and weeding.

Enable the people you support to be part of the garden maintenance, wherever possible. Promote the principles of active support – look at how you can provide graded assistance where they need additional support, and stay focussed on enabling their greatest level of choice and control.

There are simple ways that you can ensure the garden is manageable for the people you support. For instance, adding wood chips to garden borders, or really filling them with lots of lovely plants, reduces the space for weeds to grow. Within this guide we have purposely picked out plants that can thrive with limited effort too.



Remember, gardens change throughout the seasons. You have lots of opportunities to create new moments of fun and to continually promote the personality and goals of the people you support in their gardening experiences.

By following these steps, you can create a sensory garden that is accessible, fun and deeply rewarding.





Want to welcome nature?



The RSPB have created some fantastic guides on easy-to-make items that wildlife and birds love. If you're looking for a fun and sustainable activity to enjoy with the people you support and want a nature-friendly garden, why not check them out?

- [Make a bird feeder](#)
- [Make a nest box](#)
- [Create a sparrow street](#)
- [Build a hedgehog house](#)
- [Make a house for frogs and toads](#)

Explore more free guides and access support on enjoying nature at www.CommunityIntegratedCare.co.uk/Nature. We'll be adding lots of new resources throughout the year!



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