



As appeared on <http://www.mycentraljersey.com> on February 17, 2014

Plants for the senses make perfect sense says horticultural therapist Laura DePrado

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So what makes you respond to a plant, a garden, a beautiful surrounding? Perhaps it's the look, the smell, the feel, the touch, the sound or the taste. The fact is there are five ways to experience a garden. Our response and experience is based on any or all of the five senses.

Let's start with sight. Sight is the most frequently used of the senses. Color is the first to grab our attention. Colors of course convey a "sense" of their own. As we age, our ability to detect pastel and pale colors diminishes. Contrast colors compensate. For example blues, green, purple with bright reds, yellows and oranges. Naturally most people think of flowers when they think of color in the garden. However, leaves, flesh, and bark of plants can provide interesting color and texture that last throughout the season.

What if vision is limited? The garden should be filled with strong bright colors (yellows, oranges and reds, corals, lime and bright greens). Pair plants with contrasting textures and shapes. For example, plantain lilies (hostas), with thick leaves next to feathery ferns. Sturdy mammoth sunflowers matched with medium and tall ornamental grasses make a wonderful visual display. Plant vegetables like red tomatoes and yellow peppers that are easy to see through the leaves.

Some true foliage favorites I use are coleus, coral bells, hosta, hibiscus, assorted sunflowers, tiarella, Lungwort, hydrangea, and viburnum, black-eyed Susan, morning glory, canna, petunia, nasturtiums, and climbing gourds, to name a few.

There are many plants that are fragrant and appeal to our sense of smell. Smell is often overlooked as a garden pleasure, yet it is our most primitive of senses. It is also the last of the senses to become impaired as we age. Smell can trigger a flood of long-forgotten memories simply by sniffing a fragrance you encountered as a child. Some plants naturally fill the air with perfume as with many rose types, carnations, sweet alyssum, mock oranges, Chinese holly, lilacs, sweet peas. Other plants “hold” their fragrance until brushed against, or snapped. These would include lemon verbena and scented geraniums.

One of the most enjoyable ways to experience a garden is through touch. Consider these textures: Soft and smooth, papery, spiky and rough, waxy and leathery, and silky.

Have you ever closed your eyes and run your fingers through the circular pattern made from the seeds of mammoth sunflower? Try stroking the leaves of lamb’s ear, or Cuban oregano, across your cheek. Place your fingers or hand in a pond, or water fountain or feature. There is nothing like play using the sense of touch. It will make you feel like a child again. Plants for touch should be near a path, or in containers where they can be touched easily and often. Even in the middle of winter you can have a touch experience by running your hand over the layers of peeling, multi-colored bark of river birch.

Gardens are filled with many sounds. Sound orientates us to the season we are entering or exiting. For example leaves that blow in the wind, acorns dropping from trees, singing and chirping birds, bees buzzing, rain and thunder. Sounds are critical to anyone visually impaired as sound provides location cues. There are other pleasant sounds that you can introduce to the garden like wind chimes, birdhouses and feeders.

Plants that provide an endless supply of movement and sound that produce seed pods and fruit relished by wildlife like birds and insects and include several varieties of service berries, Red dogwood, winter berry holly and ornamental grasses too. Having water in the garden can offer drown out “white noise” such as noise pollution and traffic. Water also offers a playful respite for birds and insects to play and drink.

Last, but certainly not least is the sense of taste. There is nothing like the satisfying reward of gardening when it comes to delighting the taste buds. We have four types of tastes, sweet, sour, bitter and salty. Many enthusiasts devote their entire landscape to

edible plants of vegetables, fruits, herbs and edible flowers. Fresh herbs to waken the taste buds like dill, basil, onion, lavender, thyme, rosemary, and mint. Edible flowers like nasturtiums and viola make a wonderful addition. Sweet melons, corn, peppers, bitter endive and chicory, and basil of many varieties awaken the taste buds.

Plants and garden settings can provide unlimited experience, restoration and rehabilitation any time of year. A trained Horticultural therapist knows how to customize the plants, the activities, and the garden space to individuals and groups for maximum benefit.

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