

The Sensory Garden: Touch

Of all the senses we use to discover the natural world around us sight can be the obvious one, but it is often our other senses such as touch and smell that provide us with meaningful and memorable experiences connecting us with nature and our environment. Our senses are connected with memory, recalling the past and used in the present, to lay down new memories. So, to build sensory connections we need to have an array of approaches to be able to work with a wide range of people with a variety of needs. Here are some practical ways to experience the sense of touch:

Survey your outdoor space

- Note which plants you have that may be useful. Consider the texture of flower, leaf or bud shape, or the texture of tree bark.
- Before you start, check the guide to harmful plants from the **RHS** (rhs.org.uk/potentiallyharmfulgardenplants) and ensure that the plants to be handled are not be toxic if eaten or harmful when touched. Avoid plants that have very sharp thorns or spikes.
- Consider plants you might want to add to enhance the experience, there are suggestions on page 3.
- Why not label the plants to make a trail?
For ideas on how to, see thesensorytrust.org.uk/resources/activities/sensorytrailkit

If your group are not mobile, or the weather turns inclement on the day of your planned activity, bring in examples of each plant and use them indoors at a table or set up a trail around the indoor space.



Indoors or out, explore the experience of feeling the plants e.g. soft, hairy, smooth, rough, large, small, etc. It maybe another sense such as smell is experienced too. Try with eyes shut to focus on the sense of touch.

Write down the different experiences and start conversations. Who liked or disliked which plant/leaf and why? Did people have memories of the plants and what were they? Why do leaves have hairy or shiny surfaces? If you have a park or woodland nearby, go and feel different barks, smooth, flaky, ridged etc and make bark rubbings with paper, soft white cloth, old sheets, and thick crayons best used on their sides.

In a courtyard or small space

When you have decided on the plants you want to include for the touch experience you may need to plant these sensory plants into containers. Think about what conditions the plants need e.g. plants with hairy or very rolled leaves need sunny sites and well drained compost. Others with broad or shiny leaves may need shade.



Left ĩ Santolina chamaecyparissus or cotton lavender



Right ĩ Rosemary, heather, Sarcococca confusa or sweet box

What height to position them is important, as some people may not be able to bend down. Position them on tables or other support so that they are at hand level or place next to a seat or bench where they can be easily touched.

When planting up, involve your group by feeling the ingredients, encourage using your hands to break down lumps in the compost, touching and mixing in gravel or coarse sand. Be aware that some people may prefer to wear gloves to enable them to be able to touch anything. Top up the pots with gravel or stones which can be interesting to touch.

Remember that you can use *feet* to experience touch! Encourage a barefoot experience in the garden ĩ on grass or smooth paving, sand or shingle - perhaps these sensations may evoke memories of play or beach holidays. You could set this up indoors too using large trays of sand, gravel or grass.

Indoors

Where there is no outdoor garden space you may have window boxes, or hanging baskets which can be brought in for the activity. Or use indoor pot plants, again checking if they are harmful, especially cactus! There are many different leaf textures, sizes and flower shapes to feel and enjoy. Dried flowers can also be used to create an experience. Use those that are not too delicate. Cut flowers can be used in a touch activity and then arranged in vases ĩ adding an additional sensory activity for the eyes!

Water

In your garden or courtyard, you could install a safe water feature where the water flows over an object or stones which can be easily touched and of course heard, another sense. Indoors a bowl of water, perhaps with stones or pebbles, can also be used. For a follow-on sensory activity see the Trellis Activity Sheet - [Make a Mini Ornamental Pond](#)

Some plants suggestions for activities using touch

Those listed below were featured in The Sensory Garden: Touch video see [Trellis YouTube Channel](#)

Soft, grey leaves and texture

Stachys byzantina or Lambs Lugs

Stipa tenuissima or Angel Hair

Lychnis coronaria or Rose Campion

Shiny or different shaped leaves

Camellia

Fatsia japonica or Caster Oil Plant

Hemerocallis or Day Lily

Fern frond

Herbs

Fennel

Rosemary

Chives

Thyme

Flowers

Fuchsia

Centranthus ruber or Red Valerian

Yellow poppy (Welsh)

Cirsium rivulare or Plume Thistle

Indoor plants

Crassula or succulents

Cholophytum variegatum or Spider Plant

Dried flowers

Poppy

Allium christophii

Achillea millefolium or Yarrow

You can search for further examples of plants with a variety of textures and shapes at [gardenersworld.com](https://www.gardenersworld.com), see <https://www.gardenersworld.com/search?q=plants&tab=plants>