



Sensory habitat gardens for children

Children explore the world in a hands-on way. A garden that is loved by children is a place where they can play freely - dig holes, climb trees, get dirty, find bugs and butterflies, and touch the plants. A pile of dirt encourages a child to build castles, a stack of long branches can be made into a tepee or a cubby, and indigenous plants can be a doorway into the wild through a child's imagination. If you have young children, accept that their needs will take precedence over your garden until they get a little older. You may require a large open area where your kids can run around and burn off energy or space set aside for your children to build a frog bog, dig holes or grow their own plants. Active gardening helps children burn energy. A child-friendly garden is a sensory garden – a place that encourages children to touch, taste, listen and wonder.

Sound



EASTERN YELLOW ROBIN

To stimulate hearing, choose plants that make a sound when the wind passes through the foliage. The Drooping Sheoak (*Allocasuarina verticillata*) is an ideal tree to plant. The rustling leaves of this tree invokes the sound of the sea and the soft litter and the dappled shade under Sheoaks is a place for infants and toddlers to rest and play. The flow of water from a fountain or water feature can also provide a soothing sound. If your children are young, a simple saucer on the ground can be just as stimulating as a running water feature.

A pedestal birdbath and diverse layers of local plants will bring bird song to your garden. Mulch and leaf litter encourages insects in your soil and in turn birds will happily sift the mulch for the bugs and worms. Lawn and grasses left to go to seed will attract little finches and parrots. Consider creating a 'room' for children by planting a circle of bird and butterfly attracting grasses and wildflowers with an opening in the middle.

Birds are attracted to small leaved native plants, including:

Sheoak spp. (*Allocasuarina*)

Banksia spp.

Rosemary Grevillea
(*Grevillea rosmarinifolia*)

Wattle spp. (*Acacia*)

Bottlebrush (*Callistemon*)

Rock Correa (*Correa glabra*)



Touch

Plants with interesting textures appeal to our sense of touch. From the cool, springy sensation of Kidney Weed (*Dichondra repens*), the fuzzy seed heads of Pussy Tails (*Ptilotus spathulatus*) and Drumsticks (*Pycnosorus globosus*) and the rough seedpods of the Silver Banksia (*Banksia marginata*), it is possible to incorporate many different textures into the garden.

Plants with interesting textures

Austral Bugle
(*Ajuga australis*)

Blushing Bindweed
(*Convolvulus angustissimus*)

Common Billy-Buttons
(*Craspedia variabilis*)

Creeping Boobiella
(*Myoporum parvifolium*)

Drumsticks
(*Pycnosorus globosus*)

Inland Pigface
(*Carpobrotus modestus*)

Kidney Weed (*Dichondra repens*)

Pussy Tails
(*Ptilotus spathulatus*)

Sticky Everlasting
(*Xerochrysum viscosum*)

Plants with interesting seed heads, pods, and fruit

Drooping Sheoak
(*Allocasuarina verticillata*)

Silky Blue-Grass
(*Dicanthemum sericeum*)

Silver Banksia
(*Banksia marginata*)

Small-leaved Clematis
(*Clematis microphylla*)



DRUMSTICKS



CHOCOLATE LILY

Smell

There are many plants indigenous to Melbourne’s western plains that release beautiful aromas. Plant scented flowers near path edges or seats and space them at intervals around your garden so that the different scents do not become overwhelming. Highly aromatic plants such as the Chocolate Lily (*Arthropodium strictum*) smells like chocolate and the sweet smelling Austral Tobacco (*Nicotiana suaveolens*) releases a pleasant fragrance in the evening. Culinary herbs such as the Native River Mint (*Mentha australis*) have rich aromatic oils which provide a wonderful scent in the garden and taste in the kitchen.

Trees and shrubs for scent

- Austral Indigo** (*Indigofera australis*)
- Austral Stork’s-Bill** (*Pelargonium australe*)
- Black Wattle** (*Acacia mearnsii*)
- River Mint** (*Mentha australis*)
- White Elderberry** (*Sambucus gaudichaudiana*)

Wildflowers for scent

- Austral Tobacco** (*Nicotiana suaveolens*)
- Chocolate Lily** (*Arthropodium strictum*)

There are only two rules to remember when creating a sensory garden for children - involve children in the planning from the very beginning and avoid plants with thorns or toxic parts. The rest is up to you and your child’s imagination. From the age of two, children actively experience the garden. Steppers or a log laid over a hollow in the ground promotes balance. Old pots and containers from the kitchen can be used for water play and to make mud pies. Include small, enclosed spaces under shrubs, trees, or ferns – a secluded world hidden from adults can spark imagination and confidence in the natural world. Babies experience the garden through changes in light and

Sight



Adding visual interest to a sensory garden can be achieved by using plants with differing habits such as those that creep, climb, bush or stand upright. Different flowers, leaf, bark, and stem colours also provide visual appeal. Colour has a large impact in the garden. Choosing cool colours such as blue, purple, and white tend to be calming and tranquil. Warm colours such as red, orange, and yellow are stimulating and encourage activity. Plants that attract lizards, butterflies and bees also add visual interest.

Butterfly attracting plants

- Austral Indigo** (*Indigofera Australia*)
- Common Wallaby Grass** (*Rytidosperma caespitosum*)
- Common Tussock-Grass** (*Poa labillardierei*)
- Common Everlasting** (*Chrysocephalum apiculatum*)
- Fine-leaf Desert Cassia** (*Senna artemisioides ssp. filifolia*)
- Grass Triggerplant** (*Stylidium graminifolium*)

Groundcovers to attract lizards

- Nodding Salt Bush** (*Einadia nutans*)
- Ruby Saltbush** (*Echylaena tomentosa*)



shadows, colours and fragrance and the sensation of the sun’s warmth or air moving on the skin.

Remember to create a quiet spot where you can sit down, relax, and enjoy the garden. Consider investing in lightweight furniture, like folding seats and tables. Heavy furniture cannot be moved – it is nice to be able to move chairs into a patch of warmth as the sun is setting or into a shady spot on a hot summer’s day.