

Nature garden takes children on a 'journey of the senses'

An innovative garden designed to give children of all abilities the chance to access and enjoy nature has been unveiled at the [RHS Hampton Court Palace Garden Festival](#) to celebrate the government's Year of Green Action.

Created together with young people with disabilities and the [Sensory Trust](#), the garden will take visitors of all abilities on a journey through the senses, with plants specially chosen for their multi-sensory qualities.

Scent, touch and taste are all appealed to with the furry leaves of woolly thyme, while the velvety leaves of senecio 'angel wings' are for children to touch and feel. The garden is decorated with ceramic tiles designed by children with disabilities and their families.

The Year of Green Action garden will also ask visitors to pledge to help improve the environment so we become the first generation to leave it in a better state than we found it – a key objective of government's [25 Year Environment Plan](#).

Environment Secretary Michael Gove said:

The Year of Green Action garden is a demonstration of the role gardens and other outdoor spaces can play in sparking joy for nature in all children.

Now more than ever it is vital that we ensure that the next generation is engaged with the environment, not only for their own health and well-being, but for the health and well-being of the natural world itself.

Helen Rosevear, co-designer of the Year of Green Action Garden, said:

Family gardens give children one of their first opportunities to connect with nature, and the Year of Green Action garden shows how we can all create spaces for everyone to enjoy while being mindful of how they can benefit wildlife and the environment.

Family gardens, schools and other organisations can create features such as dens, sensory domes and bug hotels, but on a smaller scale we can all choose plants that have a multi sensory appeal as well as being attractive to wildlife.

Research shows spending just two hours a week in nature shown to have incredible benefits on health and wellbeing. That is why the government

launched its year-long drive – the Year of Green Action – to help everyone get involved in projects that support and enhance nature. By designing the garden to be accessible for all, it will help improve access to the natural world for children of all abilities.

Visually, the garden moves from mixed, stimulating colours of sunflowers and sweet peas on the patio and pollinator area to more calming blues and purples of lavender. The paths and surfaces created from recycled shredded rubber to create a firm but forgiving surface for children.

There is a sensory dome to provide a quiet reflective space, especially valuable for children with additional needs, while a covered craft area provides a space for the whole family to engage in nature based activities and play.

The garden is also environmentally friendly with integrated water storage and composting, plants that have been specially chosen for both their low water demand in order to reduce water use and their attractiveness to pollinators, and permeable paving to allow water to percolate and prevent flooding.

Claire Francis from the Sensory Trust said:

We are delighted to be co-designing this Year of Green Action garden and hope that it inspires many people to use our simple, low-cost techniques to create deeper, lasting connections with nature in their own garden.

The creation of the garden comes midway through the government's [Year of Green Action](#) forming a part of the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan, where individual and businesses are being encouraged to do more to help nature and the environment. Children and young people are at the heart of the Year of Green Action, which is why the government has pledged £10 million to help children from disadvantaged backgrounds better access the natural environment.

Since its [launch in January](#), the government has outlined ambitious plans to overhaul the waste system and transform household recycling, pledged support for charity [Step Up to Serve's #iwill4nature campaign](#), and set out plans to protect some of the country's rarest and most threatened fungi.

Top tips for creating accessible gardens

Height: A range of container and plant heights will bring your garden into easy reach for a range of ages and abilities. Think about vertical planters, raised beds and planting close to paths.

Surfaces: Consider the path and patio surfaces of your garden. Recycled shredded rubber provides a firm but forgiving surface, especially good for children.

Paths and routes: Try to avoid steps, sharp bends and loose or uneven

surfaces. Think about the journey through the garden, circular routes, tunnels and dens can be great fun, ensure these are accessible too.

Seating: A good bench or seat not only looks great but is essential for enjoying the garden for someone with low stamina.

Shade: This can make or break a garden for anyone that needs to avoid exposure to the sun. You can make shade from fabric canopies, trees or plant covered pergolas.

Top tips for creating a sensory garden

Plant choice: Don't just reach for plants that are heavily scented, think about colour patterns, texture, and the sound they make. Some plants, such as snapdragons, sunflowers and long grasses are great for play and craft. Consider planting some edibles for extra sensory appeal and the joy of harvesting your own food.

Water: This provides a strong sensory experience, both tactile and auditory. Even a shallow pool of water or simple water feature can provide opportunities for play, and relaxation.

More than plants: Animate your garden with objects that are interesting to explore through different senses. Tactile sculptures, textured tiles and bamboo sound tubes can be created out of natural items found in the garden and can provide enjoyment through the whole year.

Time out: A snug or den can provide a welcome space for time out and relaxation.

Plant highlights

Silver birch ('*Betula pendula*'): Chosen for its visually striking bark and light foliage, silver birch casts dappled light patterns on the sensory dome. Bark adds sensory decoration on the dome canopy. Silver birch provides food and habitat for over 300 insect species – leaves that feed ladybirds and caterpillars, seeds for birds, and homes to woodpeckers.

Woodland strawberries ('*Fragaria vesca*'): Woodland strawberries are a tasty treat for people and wildlife. Children love discovering the small fruits while birds and insects enjoy feasting on the fruits that get left behind. They are easy to grow and are a good choice for a low-water-demand garden..

Bamboo ('*Phyllostachys bissetii*'): Bamboo is chosen to demonstrate a sustainable material with a wide range of uses. In the garden, harvested bamboo has been used to make the sensory dome and the insects hanging inside. The planted bamboo tunnel provides a sensory adventure as well as shelter and shade for nesting boxes.

Senecio 'Angel Wings' ('*Stachys byzantine*'): A plant chosen for its big velvety leaves that invite children's hands to explore the extraordinary texture. Their silver colour gives strong visual contrast and they are

popular with bumble bees. They are easy to grow and as a herbaceous perennial they will remain in the garden year after year.

Woolly thyme ('*Thymus pseudolanuginosus*'): Woolly thyme, like other thymes, combines wildlife and sensory appeal in one small plant. Its soft, furry leaves are a tactile and aromatic highlight while its flowers are a magnet for bees and other pollinators. It is easy to grow and well suited to a dry garden.

Nasturtium ('*Tropaeolum majus*'): Chosen for their bright, vibrant colours and long flowering display, nasturtiums are a visual delight. They also provide edible flowers and add a more unusual taste opportunity in the garden. They provide food for long-tongued bumblebees and butterflies, as well as insects such as ladybirds and lacewings.

About the designers

Helen Rosevear is a specialist in inclusive and sensory rich garden designs and has worked with the Sensory Trust on previous garden and landscape projects. Helen lives in North Wiltshire and works as the in-house garden designer at Cotswold Estates and Gardens Ltd.

Jane Stoneham (MPhil Landscape design and horticulture, BSc (Hons) Horticulture) is a leading authority in sensory-rich and accessible garden design at the Sensory Trust. She has implemented and advised on designs for retirement schemes, schoolgrounds, hospitals and public greenspace and her books are used around the world. Helen and Jane have worked together on inclusive and sensory-rich projects for over 20 years.

About the Sensory Trust

The Sensory Trust is a leading authority on inclusive and sensory design. It uses nature and the outdoors to improve the health and wellbeing of people living with disability and health issues, their families and carers. It works throughout the UK and shares its approaches internationally with a wide network of organisations and individuals. Its aim is to make the outdoors accessible and enjoyable for all people, regardless of age, ability or social circumstance.

About the contractors

[Cotswold Estates and Gardens](#) is a long established company offering a first class comprehensive landscaping service which includes consultation and design, project management and construction, and maintenance and aftercare. Cotswold Estates and Gardens have been instrumental in developing innovative techniques for upcycling materials and using sustainable construction practices for our garden.