

HEALING/SANCTUARY GARDEN: SENSORY DESIGN ELEMENTS FOR PEOPLE OF VARYING ABILITIES

The range of abilities among people is highly varied. Many people in the general public have degrees of visual, mobility, hearing, manual and learning impairments; others are troubled by lack of stamina and extremes in size and weight. For the more seriously disabled people the design strategies are laid out in the Americans with Disabilities Guidelines (ADAAG, 1991). The concept of Universal Design seeks to eliminate barriers while providing access and usability to the broadest possible range of people.

Therapeutic Benefits

Gardens can have healing and restorative power via a number of mechanisms. The most obvious is the aesthetics of nature, that is, by creating a beautiful verdant sanctuary that will be a powerful enticement to go outdoors. Being outdoors in a natural or quasi natural setting, experiencing sunlight (20 minutes of sunlight on hands and face are required for adequate production of vitamin D), viewing trees and flowers, listening to the sound of water or birds — the combination of these and other elements that make up a garden can have measurable stress-reducing benefits. However, the healing effect of a garden will be powerfully enhanced by how it is detailed to support other sought-after activities beyond the basics of a plant filled space. These include design elements that encourage people to socialize, to spend time alone, to stroll, to choose being in the sun or shade, and so on.

Perhaps the most therapeutic quality of a healing garden space is its ability to create a sensory experience that gives both pleasure and exercise to people of all abilities. Accordingly, **a Sanctuary Garden can be seen as a *Sensory Garden*** with this purpose: to provide a safe and pleasingly **Tactile, Audible** and/or **Aromatic** environment to stimulate the senses, thereby reducing stress.

Design elements should encourage people to use all their senses:

- To touch, smell and listen if they cannot see or have partial vision,
- To touch, smell and see, if they cannot hear or are hard of hearing,
- To touch, smell, listen and look at anything within their reach if they have limited mobility, or if they have memory limitations

Design Considerations

The actual design of the garden is less important than the free and easy access. People with special needs must perceive opportunities for free and easy choices: that this garden is a special space they can enjoy much like anyone else. This necessitates that arrival at and entry into the garden has also been designed well: no perceived barriers!

People with Visual Impairments (key objective: aid in orientation)

1. Signage in Braille; illustrations in relief; topographic site map
2. Topography: avoid curves/intricate patterns; raised edging alongside path (to identify the proximity of a border or other features); landmarks/reference points to assist orientation
3. Difference in paving or path materials to provide tactile or direction change clues
4. Slope instead of steps (if steps, provide handrail)
5. Avoidance of protruding objects and overhanging branches
6. Bright colors for contrast
7. Varied textures of plants, rock, wood, and art for tactile exploration
8. Sound features (rustling plants, running water, wind chimes)
9. Colored concrete instead of white to reduce glare
10. Strongly scented plants used sparingly (a mass of scent could confuse/hinder orientation)

People with Hearing Impairments (key objective: minimize auditory stimuli)

1. Speech often may be difficult to hear (especially for the elderly), so try to reduce the levels of background noise with sound barriers of fencing, shrubs, walls, earth mounds; create quiet zones
2. Gentle water features (fountain, birdbath, gurgling stream) create a contemplative mood

People with Mobility Impairments —*inability to walk, poor balance, extremes of weight or size*
(key objective: ease of mobility)

1. Walkways wide enough for two passing wheelchairs
2. Walking aids: handrails, frequent landings to rest
3. Paving that does not inhibit movement
4. Ramps and/or slopes with rails and landings (minimize stairs; use stairs with short rises)
5. Comfortable and plentiful benches and sitting areas
6. Adequate dimensioning of spaces, i.e. a little more room to move about
7. Low transfer walls (to aid getting onto any grass to sit, or to help in standing up)
8. No deep gravel pathways or sitting areas (shallow pea gravel is good)
9. No abrupt pathway endings or dead-ends (paths should circle around or form loops)

People with Memory Loss (Alzheimer's/Dementia) (key objectives: to minimize confusion, maximize safety, and encourage aesthetic exploration)

1. Easy entrance: only one (a slightly raised overlook allows preview before entering)
2. One circular path (or pathways form loops) without confusing dead-ends
3. Landmarks for reference: a prominent arbor, tree, pond, archway, etc.
4. Many sitting areas: especially at key features/landmarks, at garden perimeters (to view into the garden), and away from looming trees (shadows from swaying branches may appear threatening)
5. Accessible pathways and garden beds: pathways are smooth and low in glare; handrails along pathways to aid in walking; raised planting beds for viewing from wheelchair or without bending
6. Plantings that evoke childhood memories
7. Non-toxic plants; no small, loose art objects (to prevent tendency to put things in mouth)
8. Plantings that stimulate the senses year-round (interesting to look at, to touch, and to smell): bright flowers, textural leaves (fuzzy, veiny, etc.), pleasant or familiar scents, fascinating tree trunks or limb structure
9. Art and water features that arouse interest and curiosity and/or that stimulate conversation
10. Garden has nearby and easily accessible restroom and parking lot (where appropriate)