Sensory Gardens
by Debra Kroon

When Master Gardeners ask folks about what they enjoy about their gardens, the answers are as varied as the people we ask. One thing in common is the impact gardening has on the senses. A garden filled with plants, including edibles, hardscapes, water features, fragrances, and resting places is a garden that ignites the senses.

Sensory gardens are gaining attention. While some are designed for children, adults love to experience the fun and surprises that strolling through a sensory garden may arouse.

For years, I have included plants that I find soothing, pleasing, and stimulating to my olfactory senses. I jokingly call my garden a “petting garden.” It’s enjoyable for me to run my hands across lavender wands as I stroll. I can’t resist grasping a rosemary stem, crushing it a bit with my fingers, and inhaling the aromatic fragrance.

In June, when the honeysuckle blooms profusely, I can smell it before I turn the corner and see it. An array of herbs, such as thyme, sage, lemon balm, mint, tarragon, lovage, and oregano add their own sweet and savory mix to the party.

A favorite perennial that will always have a place in my garden is Agastache. Our native variety, A. foeniculum (Giant Blue Hyssop) grows to 2-4’ in height and sends up blue floral spikes that pollinators love. It is a member of the mint family, but it isn’t the least bit invasive, like its cousin peppermint. Agastaches are very drought tolerant, a perfect choice for our dry climate. If Agastaches receive too much water, they will flop and the flower stems will break.

A. foeniculum has great fragrance, but it’s nothing compared to A. rupestris, sometimes called ‘Thread Leaf Giant Hyssop’. You may know it as ‘Licorice Mint’ or ‘Hummingbird Mint.’ Why do I love this plant so much? Let me count the ways.

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Small, tubular salmon/burnt orange flowers with purple calyxes, the colors of a sunset, are produced in abundance from late June through the end of summer. These flowers draw hummingbirds and butterflies.

The scent of A. rupestris be compared to black licorice or root beer. Many visitors to my garden are surprised when suddenly, the smell of a favorite sweet is on the air, and it’s coming from an Agastache.

While this plant will spread, it is not aggressive. I may find only one or two new starts each year. Some years, there are none.

This plant blooms on new wood. If you’ve ever been confused about when to prune a perennial, no worries with this plant. It grows between 1 ½ - 2 ½ ‘each season. You can cut it to the ground, and blooms will come on new growth produced this season.

A. rupestris is very drought resistant. If overwatered or planted in wet, poorly draining soils; crown rot could take it down. A. rupestris makes a great addition to borders, pollinator gardens, rock gardens, and can also be planted in a container. Plant one close to your porch or patio so you can enjoy the spectacle of visiting hummingbirds. If you plant A. rupestris, they will come.

Agastache x ‘Black Adder’ is another favorite. This is a tall plant, with dark blue flower spikes that are a pollinator magnet. Like other Agastaches, it will not tolerate wet, heavy, and poorly draining soils.

Sensory gardens can be expansive meadows or refined smaller spaces. Many assisted living or nursing care facilities are looking to Eldergrow.org for guidance in designing sensory gardens for their residents. The goal is to provide those in their care opportunities to socialize around what may have once been a beloved hobby. Not only does this enhance their learning opportunities about gardening, but it can create cultural awareness as participants share their history and knowledge.

There are many resources to help you get started planning and planting your own sensory garden.

‘Creating a Sensory Garden’, South Dakota State University Extension: https://extension.sdstate.edu/creating-sensory-garden

‘How to Create a Sensory Garden’, University of Illinois Extension https://extension.illinois.edu/how to create a…