

Organic Therapy

Sensory gardens give people a place to heal

by Sarah Zobel, from *Spirituality & Health*

SENSORY GARDENS look, smell, feel, taste, and sound beautiful. They are designed to be therapeutic. Yet the greatest healing of these places may come to those who lovingly create them.

By the time Ethan Boyers turned 2 years old in 2004, he had undergone more medical interventions than some octogenarians will ever know. Suffering from severe and frequent seizures, his tiny body had been put through endoscopies, bronchoscopies, genetic and metabolic testing, placement of a gastric feeding tube, and a medically induced coma. His team of doctors—pediatricians, neurologists, gastroenterologists, nephrologists, urologists, pulmonologists, critical care specialists,

and geneticists—was stumped. Nurses, home aides, and physical and occupational therapists were with him 80 hours each week. Open to non-Western medical options, Ethan's parents took him to an acupuncturist, looked into cranial sacral therapy, and consulted with a shaman.

Despite the ceaseless battering on his body, Ethan often found happiness and peace in the backyard of his family's Vermont home. Observing how relaxed their son was outdoors, his parents, Rachel and Richard, both trained landscape architects, decided to create a backyard haven that the entire family, including Ethan's sisters, Talia and Maya, could enjoy.

There would be plants, of course, but also wind chimes for Ethan to listen to, and a "teahouse" with sliding screen doors and a bed for Ethan. It would be wired so that Ethan's hospital equipment could be plugged in.

The family applied for and was accepted for a grant from the Make-A-Wish Foundation to create the garden, but they had not yet begun when Ethan suffered pneumonia and kidney failure, at age two and a half. The day he died, Ethan's parents and sisters spent time with him outside, where—even in his final moments—he seemed to be relaxed and calm.

Although the grant was no longer available, Talia and Maya were determined to forge ahead with the family's plans for the space, which they refer to as "Ethan's Garden." So, beginning in late 2005, the Boyers family turned their spacious backyard into a sensory-therapy garden with the help of relatives, friends, neighbors, and several local master gardeners.

"Our thoughts of sharing it with other children came more after Ethan passed," Rachel explains. "It helped us to make some sense out of why he was put in our lives and why we had gone through the experience of caring for him." A new long-term goal thus formed: to open the garden to visitors, especially other children who might benefit from its accessibility and therapeutic effects. Rachel began horticultural therapy certification studies at the New York Botanical Garden so that she could offer horticultural therapy programs to visitors.

In the garden, perennials are grouped according to a particular sensory feature such as texture (hens and chicks), color (delphiniums and geraniums), fragrance of flowers (roses and lilies) or leaves (sage, rosemary, and lavender), and sound (grasses). A long, curving stone wall that Richard built—"He found solace in the



The Chicago Botanic Garden's Sensory Garden celebrates the wonderful world of plants—their fragrances, sounds, colors, textures, and movement.

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cathartic process of laying each stone,” Rachel says—retains the perennial border. The wall is 20 inches tall so the beds are accessible to wheelchair users.

The family planted more than 4,000 bulbs, including countless daffodils that create a springtime maze. There are also vegetable beds, fairy houses, a pond with fish and a waterfall, and crab apple trees that bloom in spring and bear bright red fruit in winter. Japanese bells hanging in tree branches ring softly in the breeze.

So far, the majority of visitors have been the children of family friends and coworkers. In the future, the garden will be opened to those whom Rachel and Richard do not know personally. “Education is an important part of our mission,” Rachel says. They have given tours to local gardening groups interested in sensory gardening, as well as a Girl Scout troop whose members want to create a sensory garden at their school.

“We garden and landscape our homes because horticulture produces a sense of peace and tranquility in a troubled world,” says Richard Mattson, profes-

Although sensory gardens are primarily therapeutic, they also can be used to teach. Unlike most public botanical gardens, those that are labeled “sensory” often invite hands-on learning. So a garden created for children to indulge their sense of touch might include soft-leaved stachys (lamb’s ears), mosses, rough-barked trees, and even thorny roses.

More recently, “Alzheimer’s gardens” have been found to be beneficial to people who are in the early stages of the disease, when they are often agitated or restless. Having a safe place to move around in that is visually appealing can be part of a holistic treatment plan. Easily navigable paths are of primary concern, as are handrails, seating areas, and non-toxic plants.

Trying to experience a garden through the senses of the intended audience is important, Mattson explains. For example, while a garden for people who are visually impaired might call for fragrant flowers, it might not be necessary to go over the top with scents, since they are likely to have a naturally honed sense

of smell that compensates for their reduced ability to see. Powerfully perfumed flowers

could be overwhelming.

For the most part, however, there is no wrong way to design and nurture a sensory garden. “Gardening is universal,” Rachel says. “It’s for all ages and abilities, and it crosses all socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds.” And, as she learned from her backyard sanctuary, gardening can also help heal. **UR**

sor of horticultural therapy at Kansas State University. His studies at KSU have found significant changes in brain-wave activity, pain sensitivity reduction, and immune system functioning as a result of gardening-related activities. Studies also have shown that even looking at a garden through a hospital window eases pain and speeds healing.

What makes sensory gardens different from regular gardens is the intent with which a sensory garden is created. A garden might be designed expressly for people who are visually impaired, for individuals who use wheelchairs, or for people who are developmentally disabled.

WEB EXCLUSIVE: See more pictures of sensory gardens at utne.com/OrganicTherapy.



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Garden Variety

Sensory gardens can be found all over the world—at children’s museums, within botanical gardens, at zoos, at long-term care facilities, and as stand-alones in communities.

Garden of the Senses

Henry Doorly Zoo, Omaha, Nebraska

The garden has more than 250 kinds of herbs, perennials, and trees, along with “blankets of roses and flowers,” and is designed to ignite all five senses.

Central Park Gardens

Davis, California

This sensory garden is a collaboration between community volunteers and the city. The Central Park Gardens offer many classes and ways to get involved.

Tucawilla Preserve Sensory Garden

Museum of Arts and Sciences,

Daytona Beach, Florida

This sensory garden, at the entrance to a 90-acre nature preserve, has a butterfly and hummingbird garden and an area for native wildflowers and herbs.

Lerner Garden of the Five Senses

Coastal Maine Botanical Gardens,

Boothbay, Maine

This one-acre sensory garden includes a labyrinth and reflexology walking area, as well as an area devoted to the sense of taste.

Sally Stone Sensory Garden

Botanica, Wichita, Kansas

This new sensory garden has planting bays where wheelchair users can work with plants, as well as displays that show techniques and tools for gardeners with special needs.

William T. Bacon Sensory Garden

Chicago Botanic Garden, Chicago

In the entry garden, a large sycamore tree is surrounded by plants chosen for their fragrance and colors. Visitors can stroll next to raised beds or walk through birch trees and wildflowers.