

# Stomp, Sniff, Snack:

## Indestructible Plants for Early Care and Sensory Gardens



Sensory gardens are spaces intentionally created to allow for child-led exploration of the environment. They contain diverse plants and features that provide varied sensory experiences, including scents, tastes, textures, sounds, and visual interest. They are ideal for infants and toddlers who are not quite ready to help out in the veggie garden, and for neurodivergent children who benefit greatly from outdoor learning environments and sensory exploration.

The following plants are just a few of the many that can be included in sensory gardens or outdoor play spaces. They have been selected for their tolerance of stomping, pinching, and tasting, as well as for their lack of toxicity.

Caretakers should still account for individual sensitivities and allergies and keep an eye out for adventurous eaters consuming more than a few bites. Aromatic plants contain active oils and constituents that can become irritating in large amounts, but are still generally safe for garden exploration.

Perennial herbs allow for an enjoyable garden space with much less maintenance. Many of these plants are drought tolerant and would be ideal in a pebble garden or between stepping stones. Most of them also attract pollinators. This gives your sensory garden another interesting aspect for children to observe, as well as an opportunity to integrate scientific observation into your garden time.

## Mint

*Mentha spp.*

A group of closely related plants that hybridize easily. Known for their strong scents and flavors, and often used in drinks and desserts. Mints tolerate a wide range of growing conditions, but generally well-drained soil and part to full sun. Most grow to 2-3ft tall. They spread rapidly and are best planted in containers. You can also sink containers into the ground for a natural look that prevents them taking over the entire garden. Popular varieties are spearmint, peppermint, and apple mint. They can be enjoyed fresh or dried, and are a fun addition to infused waters to help keep young ones hydrated.

**Caution: be sure to avoid planting pennyroyals (*Mentha pulegium*, *Mentha cervina*, or *Hedeoma pulegioides*) in the children's garden as they can be toxic if ingested.**



## Clover

*Trifolium repens* and *Trifolium pratense*

Commonly used as an agricultural crop, white and purple clovers are a delightful addition to lawns or rock gardens. They help other plants by fixing nitrogen and are great food sources for bees. Clover leaves and flowers are edible, and the blooms make a fun addition to salads or teas. They enjoy loamy soil, regular moisture, and full sun. Plants will grow from 2 inches to 8 inches depending on the variety and growth conditions.





## Lemon Balm

*Melissa officinalis*

Another cousin of the mint family, lemon balm is known for its mild, soothing flavor. It also spreads easily in the garden and is best planted in containers, reaching 2-3 feet in height. Lemon balm prefers full to part sun and well-drained soils, but can tolerate many conditions. It is a favorite of honeybees, and it and other mint will attract many pollinators throughout the season. Fresh or dried leaves can be used in tea, infused water, and salads.



## Calendula or Pot Marigold

*Calendula officinalis*

A colorful addition to the garden that provides visual interest as well as flavor. The bright yellow-orange blossoms are edible and often used as a substitute for saffron. They are also a lovely addition to tea or salad. The flowers are used in herbal medicine and make a gentle topical salve. Calendula is a tender perennial, and may struggle to overwinter in Wisconsin. Plants will grow to about 12 inches tall and make excellent borders. They make plenty of seed and can be replanted that way, or they may be insulated with straw and cloth covering. Calendula prefers full sun and tolerates most soil types.





## Chamomile & Pineapple Weed

*Matricaria recutita*, *Matricaria discoidea*, and *Chamaemelum nobile*

These herb garden favorites are especially tolerant of stomping and picking. Pineapple weed is an excellent choice in a rock garden or between stepping stones. It will thrive in even the worst soils. They are ideal for nibbling or tea infusion. Depending on the variety, plants can be from 4 inches to 1 foot tall. Chamomiles are self-seeding and effectively perennial, though they may need filling in with new seeds or plants every few years depending on the site. They prefer full sun and will tolerate poor soils as long as they are well-drained.



## Bee Balm

*Monarda spp*

This fabulous native plant is known for attracting bumblebees, hummingbirds, and butterflies. It is both colorful and fragrant, and it comes in many lovely shades of purple and pink. Look for the native cultivars, as these are better for pollinators than double-blooming or ornamental ones. Monarda likes full to part sun and rich, moderately moist soil. They will grow 3-4ft tall. Monarda are prone to powdery mildew, but this does not affect the health of the plant. The young leaves and flowers are excellent in tea or infused water, and should be harvested before any signs of powdery mildew appear.





## Chives

*Allium schoenoprasum*

Chives are ultra-hardy, fragrant, and useful in the kitchen as well. Fresh and cooked chives are popular in all sorts of dishes, from omelettes to soups. The delicate purple flowers and tender stems are edible, and they make great additions to salads or topping for dips. The plants are perennial and easily started from seed. They will spread slowly and can be divided for sharing with other gardeners. Chives prefer full sun and rich soil, but can tolerate some dryness. They can grow up to about 2ft, but should be cut back regularly to ensure fresh growth.



## Thyme

*Thymus spp*

A well known culinary herb, thymes come in many flavors and sizes. Some great species include lemon thyme and creeping thyme, which is an excellent ground cover that tolerates lots of stepping. They can be used in the kitchen for tea, soups, pasta, and more, or just enjoyed in the garden for their fragrance and intricate tiny leaves and flowers. They are also a favorite of bees. Thymes are tolerant of most soil types, especially dry or rocky areas. They prefer full to part sun and need good drainage. They will grow from 4 inches to 12 inches depending on variety.





## Violets

*Viola spp*

An often overlooked plant, these tough little flowers can be found growing in woodlands, lawns, and even between cracks on the sidewalk. There are both native and ornamental varieties, and all parts of the plant are edible. Violet flowers make a lovely addition to salads, or they can be made into a [delightful syrup](#) that changes color at different pH levels (a fun and tasty science demonstration!) Violets prefer shade or part shade, but will tolerate full sunlight. They can grow in many soil types, though generally they prefer well-watered loam. Once established, their roots are very sturdy and they can endure lots of stepping and picking. They grow up to 6 inches tall depending on species.



## Purslane

*Portulaca oleracea*

This common garden weed is actually cultivated as a vegetable in many parts of the world, and it's starting to gain popularity in the United States. It grows in bare, disturbed garden soil and is an excellent ground cover to help prevent erosion. The leaves and stems are very succulent, making it an interesting plant to explore via touch as well as taste. All parts of the plant are edible, and it makes a delicious salad or can be cooked as any other green. Purslane prefers full sun and will tolerate many soil types. It does not get much taller than 4 inches, but the stems will spread horizontally up to 2 feet.



## Other Plants to Try

- **Nasturtium** -- vibrant edible flowers that attract bees and go great in salads. Annual, must be replanted each year.
- **Oregano** -- a hardy Mediterranean herb ideal for rock gardens. Add to salads, pizza, or pasta! Many varieties are perennial in Wisconsin.
- **Sage** -- garden sage is ideal for sensory exploration and cooking, but there are many decorative varieties of *Salvia spp* that have bright flowers and attract pollinators. Annual or perennial.
- **Rosemary** -- though somewhat difficult to cultivate in Midwestern climates, this is a lovely plant for both culinary and sensory gardens. It may be a bit too pungent for some young learners, but is worth a try in your garden. Annual or overwintered.
- **Lavender** -- similarly finicky to cultivate, this garden favorite prefers sandy, well drained soils. It can be very strong smelling and has powerful natural oils, but attracts humans and pollinators alike with beautiful flowers and fragrance. Also edible! Annual or overwintered in our climate.
- **Strawberries** -- both wild and domestic varieties of strawberry are great additions to veggie beds, borders, and rock gardens. Edible and perennial.
- **Dandelion** -- while commonly considered a weed, dandelion is a lovely treat for pollinators as well as a delicious edible plant. Instead of removing them from your space, add leaves to salad, make tea from flowers, or try roasted roots!
- **Broadleaf Plantain** -- another cosmopolitan 'weed' that will withstand foot traffic and poor soils. Leaves and seeds are edible as well as medicinal, and the leaves are a helpful treatment for bug bites and stings.

## Questions? Comments? Get in touch!

Reach out to us at Rooted at [wifarmtoece@rootedwi.org](mailto:wifarmtoece@rootedwi.org) -- we'd love to provide support for your gardening adventures! Visit our website at [rootedwi.org](http://rootedwi.org) for more Farm to ECE resources.