



# Sensory Arts Garden: An Inclusive Space for Discovery and Enrichment

## Project Innovation Highlights

The sensory arts garden is a therapeutic space for children and adults, especially those with sensory processing challenges, providing a meaningful experience through the exploration of nature.



A series of reduced and integrated sensory spaces provide a calming counterpoint for an individual who may experience hypersensitivity or seek a moment of respite or refuge. Each space features a seating area for individual or group use. Tactile engagement and gross motor skills are enhanced through interaction with the pebble paving.

**Dirtworks™**  
Landscape Architecture, PC 

### About Dirtworks

Dirtworks P.C. is an internationally award winning Landscape Architecture firm located in New York City. Our practice is dedicated to designing spaces that bridge differences in age, ability and culture through shared experiences. We believe design solutions should promote a close connection to nature and seek to improve the health and well-being of the individual and communities they occupy.

### Contact

David Kamp, FASLA, LF, NA  
President / Founder  
dkamp@dirtworks.us  
[www.dirtworks.us](http://www.dirtworks.us)

## Solving a Healthcare Challenge

The Sensory Arts Garden at The Els Center of Excellence is purposely designed for individuals with autism. Through interaction with plants and materials that engage the senses – sight, smell, touch, taste, sound – and also movement, the garden provides a much-needed balance of stimulating and calming sensory experiences. The garden addresses the challenge of creating a nurturing sensory environment for individuals with autism to enhance their capacity to successfully work, play, socialize and learn.



An oval "lawn" of resilient paving features a variety of fixed and movable seating choices. Safety and security are reflected in the overall design, details and material selections; smooth and consistent surfaces eliminate awkward corners and address potential collisions/adverse reactions.



## Solution

Grounded in interdisciplinary research and collaboration, the Sensory Arts Garden celebrates individual strengths and preferences and positions nature as an essential partner in health and wellness. Through calibrated sensory experiences, sensitive details and careful programming, the garden enriches motor, sensory, cognitive and social skills. Within a lush and safe setting, the garden provides opportunity and choice for each visitor to engage with nature on their own terms, in their own way and at their own pace.

## Features

The garden's program, design, and construction involved collaboration with the Center's Director of Programming and an occupational therapist. The garden reflects a carefully researched and nuanced response to the breadth and complexity of autism. Considerations for routine, pattern, repetition, and wayfinding informed the design. While maintaining clear sight lines for staff, flexibility and varying degrees of openness allow for discovery and autonomy. Material and furnishing choices reflect appropriateness, safety, durability, and therapeutic potential. Nuanced color changes and textured paving signal changes in sensory experience or activity. "Sensory rooms," centrally aligned for easy access, contain custom planters that discretely target the five senses with engaging plants. Reduced sensory spaces, "places away," provide a calming counterpoint for those experiencing hypersensitivity.

**Project Completion Date:** November 2017



The garden accommodates a variety of needs: solitude and socialization, respite and activity, focused engagement or therapy, and simple distractions. A range of seating types throughout the garden provide varying levels proprioceptive and vestibular experiences.



A grid of foxtail palms offers a structural rhythm and uniform canopy providing a calming enclosure and relief from the sun. Within the recognizable patterns and geometry a degree of openness aids in creating opportunities for discovery, free play and autonomy.



Water spheres provide many sensory experiences including the proprioceptive and vestibular. Their placement, low to the ground and tucked into planting beds, requires one to squat, reach, and balance. Smooth and rigid spheres offer varied tactile engagement.

## Evaluation and Success

Anecdotal responses highlight the positive impact of the garden for students, private clients, and staff. Individuals with autism engaging in the garden have found reprieve in the "places away" and enrichment through exploration of the plants in the sensory rooms. Students have found their favorite place in the garden and quickly make their way to this special spot each visit. The garden has also become a place for outdoor instruction, providing opportunities to connect with students who can be challenging to reach. Participants in music and yoga classes and reading groups have all benefited from this nature rich classroom. Formal research is anticipated to begin soon.

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