

A garden for visually impaired visitors: A unique experience

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The Courtyard of the Senses, created in 1999, is a small 500 m² garden at the Montréal Botanical Garden that introduces visitors to a whole new way of “seeing” the plant world. The Courtyard was nine years in the making, and was created with the help of Lions Clubs International, which raised the necessary funds. It was designed by the city of Montréal Parks Department, with guidance from two Montréal associations for the blind: the Institut Nazareth et Louis-Braille and the Regroupement des aveugles et amblyopes du Montréal métropolitain.

What sets the Courtyard of the Senses apart is the fact that the plants there are not intended primarily to be pleasing to the eye, but rather to take visually impaired visitors (and anyone else interested in a different kind of garden experience) on a tour that appeals instead to their senses of smell, taste, touch and hearing. Along the way they are guided by panels in Latin, English, French and Braille.

The Courtyard of the Senses is divided into four sections, with plants corresponding to different tactile sensations: soft, rough, prickly and sticky. The plants are carefully selected by a team of horticulturists, agronomists and guides, all working in close collaboration. Along with different textures there are the scents given off by the flowers and foliage of the wide variety of species and cultivars in this garden. The scents are the most difficult to settle on, since people perceive smells so differently. Before introducing a plant into one of the sections, the horticulturist consults the team of guides, who have developed extensive expertise over time. Even though we give each plant considerable thought, visitors’ comments sometimes lead us to think that a given plant might have been better suited to another section.

In the **soft section**, there are fine, silky and downy textures, finely toothed leaves and other very hairy ones with a velvety surface. The scents in this section are pleasant, sweet, fruity and floral. Here we find honeysuckle, star magnolia and fruit sage, and such touchable plants as Schmidt wormwood, lamb’s-ears and ‘Silver Lining’ mullein. In the **rough section**, leaf surfaces have a coarser texture, and the scents are lemony. Here visitors find strawflower and rocky mountain juniper, whose foliage consists of tiny scaled leaves imparting a finely abrasive texture overall. Lemon geranium and lemon verbena are also part of the landscape, in keeping with the lemon theme. Plants in the **prickly section** are chosen so as to avoid injuries, but still allow visitors to appreciate their jagged texture. Visitors are guided in touching the plants, and asked to do so very carefully. They can handle purple coneflower, whose flowers have a slightly prickly texture. The spicy scents in this section include basil, selected for its wonderful fragrance reminiscent of cloves and allspice, while the foliage of oakleaf geranium gives off a strong smell of black pepper. In the last section, common gum cistus is covered in resinous secretions that stick to visitors’ fingers, perovskia has a penetrating fragrance that takes you by surprise when you stroke its leaves, and the blue gum tree has a strong medicinal smell of camphor. These are just a few of the plants in this part of the **sticky section**. Overall, there are more than 125 species and cultivars in the collection. A list is available on the Garden Website, at www.ville.montreal.qc.ca/jardin/jardin_virtuel/cour_sens/cour_sens.htm.

There are guides stationed in the Courtyard of the Senses from mid-June to early September. The program is intended for visually impaired visitors, but is also sure to interest anyone looking for a very different approach to the plant world. The Montréal Botanical Garden's guides (some with full vision and others blind or with limited vision) encourage visitors to touch, feel and sometimes even taste the plants. Although this is not a natural approach for most visitors, they end up playing along and enjoying the experience.

Visitors to the Courtyard of the Senses are like all others who come to the Botanical Garden, except that those with disabilities naturally tend to spend longer in this garden. In 2005, upwards of 9,000 people took part in the visitor activities offered in the Courtyard of the Senses. A survey conducted in 2001 by the Quebec Statistics Institute estimated that nearly 10,900 children have a visual handicap, and approximately 107,500 adults. A person is considered to have a visual handicap in Quebec if his or her vision meets the standards set out in the Quebec *Health Insurance Act*. It defines a visual handicap as follows: A deficiency that, after correction by means of appropriate ophthalmic lenses, leaves only a visual acuity in each eye of less than 6/21 (20/70) or a reduced field of vision in each eye and that, in either case, renders the person incapable of reading, writing or moving about in an unfamiliar environment. Despite these impressive statistics, only ten groups of visually impaired people visited the Courtyard of the Senses last year.

Visually impaired visitors find the experience just as fascinating as anyone else, with the difference that they require more support. There is a handrail running around the Courtyard, guiding visitors in complete safety through the four sections. The plants, placed within easy reach next to the handrail, are identified in Latin, English, French and Braille. The ground surface is different in each section, so that visually impaired people can find their way about more easily. Watching visually impaired visitors shows us how we use our own senses, in fact. I watched a young girl exploring the Courtyard to see how she explored her environment – not only with her fingers, but with her entire body. When she came to a juniper, she simply put her arms around it to “see” how big it was!

Our techniques are different when we work with intellectually impaired visitors. We consult the accompanying adult to determine the appropriate approach. Sometimes the visitor is uncomfortable with strangers, in which case the accompanying adult talks to the visitor and interprets our guide's instructions and comments.

Children with no disabilities are just naturally inclined to touch the world around them. With them, we take a two-part approach to touring the Courtyard of the Senses. They begin by exploring it on their own, sometimes running around the Courtyard, and then we give them a challenge. Using different playing cards, they have to find certain plants. This forces them to look closely at the plants and to focus on plants with specific features. Lastly, we ask them to put their sense of hearing to the test and try some musical instruments made from plants: a balafon (calabash gourd and rosewood), a thumb piano (calabash gourd), a rain stick (cactus stem), etc.

In the end, this little garden guarantees a unique experience for visitors of all stripes, thanks in large part to the exceptional job done by our guides, who make the rich diversity of the plant world accessible to everyone. They work tirelessly to help visitors feel a range of textures and smell the most subtle scents and rich fragrances. For to fully appreciate your surroundings, you have to learn to close your eyes. As Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's Little Prince discovered, “what is essential is invisible to the eye.”

