Top tips: overcoming sensory barriers

Feel Good by Growing project PRUs gave us some of their top tips for helping pupils to overcome sensory barriers while gardening.

Weather

- Embrace the weather! Coats on and go outside anyway
- Provide wellies and gloves to protect hands and feet from cold, wet conditions
- Garden in a polytunnel or outdoor classroom
- Put seats in inside areas, e.g. greenhouse, dens or a shed, and drink hot chocolate
- Give two or three choices, including indoor choices with garden-related activities, e.g. making bird feeders/bird cakes, then going outside for five minutes to put bird feeders out, to give some time outdoors
- Spend time researching plants, planning for what can be done when the weather improves

Helpful resources (click to access)

Bird feeder garland	Make a bird cake	Decorate a plant pot	Sowing in pots
How to make newspaper pots	What shall we grow?	National Education Nature Park: Nature-based discovery guide	

Soil and mud

- Provide wellies and gardening gloves to protect hands and shoes
- Provide latex gloves – some students with sensory issues like to wear these under their gardening gloves (these can be named so they can be re-used)
- Use trowels or spoons to handle compost or soil
- Have hand washing facilities outside: an outdoor sink (this could be a washing up bowl or bucket of water) or solar shower, so that students can then clean their hands as often as they need to
- Use a mindfulness approach to get children used to being near or touching soil – gradually introduce soil, first holding a small amount and looking at it, appreciating and understanding it, or start with leaves and build up to holding soil
- Find out what the students will engage with and work with that, for example if a child is interested in leaves, they can make a leaf pile or create leaf art

Helpful resources (click to access)

Soil texture test	Art from the garden	Make a leaf compost bin

Insects and worms

- Be enthusiastic about insects and worms! This enthusiasm passes on to pupils
- Wearing gloves can help to overcome nervousness over possibly touching worms etc. when digging
- Build a bug hotel, create a log pile habitat or make a wormery – caring for insects and other invertebrates can help develop respect for them and build confidence around them
- Hatch caterpillars from eggs in the classroom and watch the lifecycle as they develop into butterflies, so that pupils can get used to being close to insects
- Watching pollinating insects visiting flowers can help to inspire fascination and enthusiasm
- Take photographs of insects and/or look them up in books – this can develop understanding and help to reduce fear

Helpful resources (click to access)

Small bug homes	Make a bug hotel	Mini wormery
Soil dwellers spotter guide	Pollinating insects spotter guide	Worm fact sheet

Smell and taste

- Set up a tasting session where students are encouraged to try edible plants such as herbs. Tip: have drinking water on hand for pupils
- Involve the group in the whole process of growing edible plants, from sowing and planting to caring for the plants, then harvesting and using in food preparation e.g. basil on pizzas, and finally tasting and sharing
- When harvesting food, encourage pupils to smell and feel it and think of words to describe what it smells and feels like before tasting it
- Talk to pupils about the taste of foods they enjoy and help them to make the connection between herbs or vegetables they are tasting and familiar food, e.g. pizza or curry
- Have an area with soil, plants or leaves in the classroom to support children to become familiar with the scents of nature
- Take children on a 'scent safari'. Start inside with familiar scents before moving outside. Talk about the scents they may encounter in advance and encourage them to express preferences

Helpful resources (click to access)

Sensory sensations (class topic)	Edible flowers information sheet	Guess the herb	Make a perfume pot	Pea head person