

Where to start: As carer for my wife who is suffering with Alzheimer's disease I am researching a back-up care plan for her in case anything should happen to me. I have noticed that most care homes don't appear to offer anything in the way of plant sensory perception, therapy, or simple vegetable production for the homes own kitchens. The sense of smell can be stimulated so easily and safely by culinary herbs, yet this sense is often ignored. As a keen vegetable gardener and fellow of the National Vegetable Society, I would like to help to rectify this. All the following plants can be bought from garden centres in the spring, or raised simply from seed. Care homes generally have sterile gardens contracted out for health and safety and low maintenance reasons, but these contractors should be encouraged to provide herb gardens and small sunny areas so that they can be planted up appropriately. Many will even help to involve and lead suitable staff and gardening clubs. Productive fruit trees and bushes can be planted instead of simply ornamental varieties and the blossom of these alone is well worth seeing. Don't grow vegetables that cheap to buy in quantities like onions, leeks, potatoes and carrots etc. Save your efforts for things that will repay your efforts handsomely.

A simple start could be a herb garden doubling as a sensory experience. This would stimulate the senses of smell, sight and texture and additionally benefit the kitchen and be appreciated by any chef. Sensory plants should be able to be smelt, touched and tasted, though this last is best done in the cooking as flavours can be intense. Place the garden conveniently and ideally also close to the kitchens. Start with good aromatic herbs that are both recognised and useful in the kitchen such as: Rosemary, fennel, thyme, mint, parsley, sage, curry plant, lavender, bay, camomile and chives etc. Plant to type in short or tall pots, where people can sit and enjoy the touch and scent sensations and along paths where they may brush past and bruise foliage to enjoy the scents released. Pickings can also be taken indoors during poor weather and for non mobile people to enjoy. Additional sensory plants can be added as desired, but avoid any poisonous plants in case anyone should be tempted to taste them.

Culinary herbs such as above can also be dried and used to make **teas and tisanes** and put in containers, paper and cloth packets – even an old sock, **as safe pot-pourri and de-odourisers**. Lavender is of course very useful here.

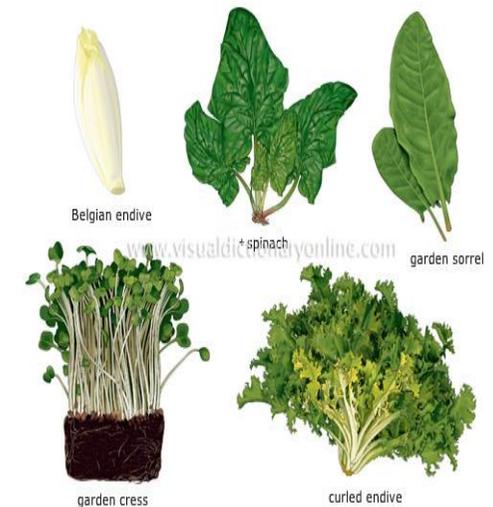
Moving On: A gardening club can be started amongst able bodied and interested people. I suggest that the simplest most productive and useful vegetables requiring the least effort are: climbing runner and French beans. Plant these in late April or May around wig-wams of six or so tall canes, tied at the top. Beans need regular watering and picking to avoid toughness and small crops. - The more you pick, the more they crop! Courgettes should be planted in May. Remember that the mature plant will need to occupy a much larger area than you may expect, so plant each in about a square foot of soil. They will need to be regularly picked to avoid just a few fruits running to marrow size. The Swiss chard variety *Bright Lights* produces brightly coloured stems and chard is very productive, producing new salad leaves and two cooked vegetables when used as spinach and the leaf ribs can be used too. Beetroots are especially useful as both the roots (well known for helping to reduce blood pressure) and leaves can be eaten, the latter again used as salad or spinach. Lettuce is a good choice, but needs to be cropped by picking off a few leaves at a time rather than cutting off the whole head to avoid killing the plant. But don't plant too much! Trays of living salads can be bought from the supermarket Lidl's and elsewhere. A tray like this bought and transplanted out say four times a year will provide endless salads. Nasturtiums are also of course very pretty, but both the foliage and flowers are also delicious raw in salads. Very valuable in the winter are miners lettuce, claytonia and American cress. Also well worth growing are perennial rocket and sorrel etc, but the list obviously becomes endless with enough interest.

Seed sprouting is very beneficial as the tiny plants are additionally packed full of vitamins and nutrients. The range of seeds available is now vast, but mustard and cress are still two of the best things to grow. Sprout seeds on kitchen towel using old food cartons, or more professionally using small simple kits or even a purpose built machine such as the *autogreen*. Also extremely valuable are microveg such as pea and broad bean shoots. Grow these in old food trays in a little soil to garnish and liven up salads etc. Pea shoots especially are a very vibrant taste.

Things to avoid: Vulnerable people need to be protected from dangers such as unsafe pots and constructions and pesticides etc. Poisonous plants include **the stalks and foliage** of all members of the nightshade family such as tomatoes, potatoes, peppers, chillies and aubergines. Also the same of parsnips and rhubarb leaves.

Don't be afraid of health and safety issues. The above plants are all very safe used as above, but if you are not sure of anything, check it out! Think things out and enjoy the benefits that these simple gardening measures can bring.

Safe Sensory and Culinary Gardening Ideas for Care Homes



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