

CATEGORY: POPULATIONS/HORTICULTURAL PROGRAMS IN SPECIFIC SETTINGS

Autism Spectrum Disorder Populations & Horticultural Programs

“Autism or autism spectrum disorder (ASD), refers to a range of conditions characterized by challenges with repetitive behavior, social skills, verbal and non-verbal communication and how the brain processes environmental information (Autismspeaks, n.d.). Research has determined that there are subtypes influenced by genetic and environmental factors. ‘Each person with autism has a distinct set of strengths and challenges...[impacting how they] learn, think and problem-solve’. ‘In 2013, the American Psychiatric Association merged four distinct autism diagnoses into one umbrella diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). They included autistic disorder, childhood disintegrative disorder, pervasive developmental disorder-not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS) and Asperger syndrome’” (Fleming, 2022). Some people with autism *may* feel, understand or process senses (touch, taste, smell, see and hear) more or less than other people. Their responses *may* be different from others.

Recent research on autism spectrum disorder has been investigating connections between mutations in genes (Laviv, 2021), altered gut microbiota-changes in bacterial composition & fungal community (Krajmalnik-Brown, 2021), cerebellar differences in the brain (Brandenburg, 2021), immune dysfunction & inflammation as contributors to neurodevelopmental deficits observed in people with ASD (Bozzi, 2021), along with atypical visual attention/eye morphology/ocular function of people with ASD (Troiani & Dicrisio, 2020), and the role of environmental factors in ASD (Chauhan, 2020).

Exposure to nature, gardens, gardening, horticultural therapy and other plant-based interventions can address behavior, socialization and lower physical activity levels for people with autism spectrum disorder (Jachyra et al., 2020; Karthikeyan, 2023; Mahler, 2022). Literature on the role sensory integration using plant-based activities and interventions with this population is teasing out greater connections (Bašić et al. 2021; Gabaldo, 2019; Kormanik, & Skuthan, 2024).

These types of programs are able to manage safety issues (elopement, risky behavior, appropriate staff: participant ratio, safe physical settings) while providing individualized, meaningful activities across functioning levels for this population. Sensory gardens continue to be important for individuals with autism, providing appropriate sensory stimulation, access to green space, and the broader community.

Garden and nature access including design specifications to make access better for people with neuro-development & intellectual disabilities continue to improve and be part of the conversation (ASLA, 2022; Pouya, et al., 2024; Sachs & Vincenta, 2022; Scartazzi et al., 2021; Wells, et al., 2025). “Specifically designed playgrounds with a mix of spaces that provide opportunity for physical challenge, structured and imaginative play, and solitary observation can help facilitate positive peer interactions in autistic children” (ASLA, 2022a). Use of school gardens for activities, health interventions, applied behavioral analyses (ABA), and behavior intervention plans (BIP) continue to improve health strategies (Fleming, 2024). More information is being made available on prevalence of anxiety disorders and light sensitivity by people with an autism spectrum disorder.

For related resources refer to category: Horticultural Therapy & Health Services category: HT & TH; and Populations/Horticulture Programs in Specific Settings Category: Mental Health.

Key Organizations

Most of these national organizations have local chapters.

[Asperger/Autism Network](#)

[Association for Science in Autism Treatment](#)

[Autism CRC](#)

[Autism Research Institute](#)

[Autism Self Advocacy Network](#)

[Autismspeaks](#)

[Autism Society of America](#)

[Dan Marino Foundation](#) (Fort Lauderdale, FL)

[National Autism Association](#) (NAA)

[Simons Foundation Autism Research Initiative](#) (SFARI)

[The Center for Autism and Related Disabilities](#)

[US Autism Association](#)

[US Autism World Alliance](#)

Books, journals & epublications on autism & horticulture programs

American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders*, Fifth Edition. American Psychiatric Association.

Autism Advocate Parenting Magazine

[Autism](#) journal.

Autism CRC. (2023). [National guideline for supporting the learning, participation, and wellbeing of autistic children and the families of Australia.](#)

Autism.org. (2022). [ARI-funded research studies 2021.](#)

Etherington, N. (2016). *Gardening for children with autism spectrum disorder and special educational needs: Engaging with nature to combat anxiety, promote sensory integration and build social skills.* Jessica Kingsley Publisher.

ELEMY. (2021). [8 autism organizations worth joining or supporting](#) (with references listing autism organizations). ELEMY.

[International Journal of Autism](#)

[Junior Master Gardener curricula](#)

[Journal of Autism and Developmental Disabilities](#)

[Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders](#)

[S.843 - Combatting Autism Act of 2006](#)

Research & articles on autism & horticulture programs

Recently published selected research & articles:

Afaily-Zadeh, J. (2023). [Wellbeing in nature – How being outside can help autistic people’s wellbeing.](#) National Autistic Society.

American Society of Landscape Architects. (2022a). Professional practice Children: Autism spectrum disorders.

American Society of Landscape Architects. (2022b). Professional practice universal design.

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- disorder (ASD). *AIP Conference Proceedings*.
- Autism Nova Scotia. (2022). What is autism?
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Young, P. (2026). Finding nature’s rhythm: Supporting autistic children outdoors. *Cultivate*, 6(1).

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Examples of autism focused horticulture programs

Acres Project, a member of *Care Farming Network*, provides horticultural activities for individuals with autism and other disabilities using a hydroponic greenhouse, outdoor vegetable garden and farm stand.

<https://www.acresproject.org/gardening-and-growing>

Adult Autism Center’s agriculture program teaches new skills, caring for plants outdoors and in greenhouse while promoting involvement in the Utah community.

<https://adulthoodautismcenter.org/programs/agriculture-program-for-adults-with-autism/>

Autism Nature Trail (The ANT) at Letchworth State Park is an outdoor experience designed for visitors on the autism spectrum with a range of abilities, appropriate and enjoyable for all abilities and ages using a reflection knoll, Meadow run and climb area, music circle and more.

<https://autismnaturetrail.com/>

Autism Together’s video on its *Sensory Garden*, UK demonstrates features of their sensory garden with experiences outdoors, soft paths, musical area, swing, sunshade, soft sensory sofas, color panels, and textured panels.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JQM2C4LBlal>

Bittersweet Farms in Whitehouse, OH is a farm-based program for adults with autism.

<https://www.bittersweetfarms.org/>

Botanical gardens and museums in multiple communities offer sensory-friendly programs for people on the autism spectrum including *Fairchild Topical Botanic Gardens*, Miami, *Missouri Botanical Garden*, and *The Huntington Library Art Museum and Botanical Garden*, CA, among others.

Bucks County Audubon Society at Honey Hollow’s healing garden was specifically designed to support the needs of adults with autism and intellectual disabilities, to be used by clients of nearby *Peaceful Living* facility.

<https://www.bcas.org/event/healing-garden-ribbon-cutting-ceremony/>

Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden, OH. has sensory friendly programs and facilities including a sensory map, developed in partnership with Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center. Supports include employees with training in neurodevelopmental and related disabilities, sensory bags, visual supports and calming rooms are also available.

https://cincinnati-zoo.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Sensory_Map_2025.pdf

Cooper Riis non-profit residential healing community for adults with a range of mental health challenges including neurodiversity support uses therapeutic horticulture, gardening and other nature activities in a farm setting.

<https://www.cooperriis.org/>

Denver Botanic Gardens hosts [therapeutic horticulture sessions with a sensory processing](#) focus including Sensory Adventures, Summer Low Sensory Mornings, & Sensory Processing & Autism Resource Kits.

Deveraux Advanced Behavioral Health New Jersey offers a vocational program teaching plant skills for adults with autism and developmental disabilities.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IUiQw1XQxGk>

Dominion School for Autism participates in the vocational program at Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden, Richmond VA, where students volunteer at the garden, supplementing their career and work experiences.

<https://www.lewisginter.org/students-create-wildlife-tree/>

Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden, Miami FL, offers Plants and People Horticultural Therapy Program for children with autism spectrum disorder and their families.

<https://fairchildgarden.org/group-programs/>

[Greens Do Good program](#) in Hackensack, NJ indoor hydroponic farm provides work-based learning to young adults on the autism spectrum.

Growing Solutions Farms, Chicago, was created as a vocational therapy garden for young adults with autism recognizing the large number of young adults who will turn 22 and age out of supports in public school systems.

<https://www.urbanautismsolutions.com/growing-solutions-farm>

Legacy Farms offers individuals on the autism spectrum opportunities to garden.

<https://www.legacyfarmsvirginia.org/seedsofhope/2015/10/14/gardening-and-autism-a-match-made-in-heaven>

Miami Children's Museum hosts Sensory Friendly Saturdays the second Sat each month with hands-on activities, sensory friendly stage performance and the Multi-Sensory/Snoezelen Room and its visuals in reduced comfortable lighting supporting sensory processing disorders and developmental delays.

<https://www.miamichildrensmuseum.org/sensory-friendly-saturdays>

Missouri Botanical Garden and its Zimmerman Sensory Garden engage the senses offering an immersive sensory experience for all visitors. It offers therapeutic horticulture programs as well.

<https://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/learn-discover/therapeutic-horticulture/zimmerman-sensory-garden>

Naples Botanical Garden hosts free Sensory-Friendly Saturdays throughout the year, certified as an Autism –Friendly venue through the Center for Autism & Related Disabilities (CARD) at the University of South Florida.

<https://www.naplesgarden.org/calendar/sensory-friendly-saturdays/>

Sense Ability Play Café (New Port Richey, FL) is primarily designed for pre-school aged children using themes with roots in plant and nature – leaf owl, root hedgehog, tree turtle, flower butterfly and fox creeper.

<https://senseabilityplaycafe.com/#about>

Shrub Oak International School offers gardening activities for its students with autism.

<https://www.shruboak.org/growth-in-the-garden-a-therapeutic-and-educational-tool-for-autistic-individuals/>

The Huntington Library, Art Museum, & Botanical Gardens supports autism awareness recognizing sensory stimulation and providing experiences in the Children’s Garden, knowing quiet places are important. Also provides [Meet Me in the Garden program](#).

<https://www.huntington.org/verso/2017/03/autism-awareness-huntington>

<https://www.huntington.org/verso/senses-and-sensibility-sensory-adventures-gardens>

The Sensory Garden at the Els Center for Excellence (school) in Jupiter, FL is a 13,000 sq. ft. garden designed specifically for children with autism to play, socialize, and learn, with nooks called Places Away for calming spaces for example.

<https://www.elsforautism.org/the-els-center-of-excellence/sensory-arts-garden/>

Videos, websites & webinars on autism & horticulture programs

6 Tips for Gardening with Kids with Autism free downloadable digital book from Special Learning House offers ideas like visual schedule, plants not seeds, watering tips and journaling.

<https://www.speciallearninghouse.com/6-tips-to-make-gardening-with-children-with-autism-easy-fun/>

Community & Acceptance – ACE Coalition on Dan Marino Foundation website provides definitions, terminology, and links for people involved or diagnosed with autism.

<https://danmarinofoundation.org/community-and-acceptance-ace-coalition/>

Denver Botanic Gardens’ sensory processing and autism resource kits available to visitors.

<https://www.botanicgardens.org/blog/sensory-processing-and-autism-resource-kits-now-available>

Designing Garden Space for Youth with Autism Spectrum Disorder presented by Kids Gardening covers important points when gardening or designing outdoor spaces.

<https://kidsgardening.org/resources/designing-a-school-garden-youth-with-autism-spectrum-disorder/>

Evidence-based Practices for Autism website from the National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorder identifies best practices, models and resources.

<https://autismpdc.fpg.unc.edu/evidence-based-practices>

Florida Department of Financial Services, Division of Consumer Services hosts a website for individuals with ASD and their families, offering resources and support on insurance policies, benefits.

<https://www.myfloridacfo.com/Division/Consumers/ConsumerProtections/Autism-Spectrum-Disorder/>

Gardening Therapy for Children with Autism, from Autispark, an educational app, suggests plant-based ideas and activities including planting, visual, tactile, and olfactory stimulation, written by Dr. Vishnu Priya, M.Sc in occupational therapy.

<https://www.autispark.com/gardening-therapy-for-children-with-autism/>

Garden Therapy/Autism Awareness/Spring Vegetable Harvest video shows kids, some with autism, gardening and connecting with food.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YquEZCEbA-U>

Horticultural Therapy for Autism short video identifies benefits of this therapeutic modality.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JJT_6CDBvEE

Kids Gardening organization's website offers ideas for designing garden spaces for youth with autism spectrum disorder, with attention to light, plants and opportunities for choice.

<https://kidsgardening.org/resources/designing-a-school-garden-youth-with-autism-spectrum-disorder/>

Living Autism website provides tips in "How to Make Your Garden Safer and More Enjoyable for Your Autistic Child". Creating a friendly outdoor space, and fun educational outdoor activities included.

<https://livingautism.com/how-to-make-your-garden-safer-and-more-enjoyable-for-your-autistic-child/>

Morton Arboretum. (n.d.) Outdoor proprioceptive activities.

mortonarb.org/app/uploads/2022/06/Outdoor-Proprioceptive-Activities.pdf

Therapeutic Horticulture Activities Database (THAD) suggests activities for people living with autism spectrum disorder & other populations ([blueberry activities](#), [field trip to community garden](#)).

<https://hos.ifas.ufl.edu/therapeutic-horticulture-activities-database/>

The National Autistic Society – Gardens and Health video shows importance of their public garden, which supports volunteering, plantings and connecting with nature by people with autism.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bvMP-XHpqo>

Top 10 Studies of 2020 on Autism Research, identified by Autism Speaks, lists important research in areas of diagnosis, health disparities, outcomes for autistic adults, and genetic and biology.

<https://www.autismspeaks.org/science-news/autism-speaks-names-top-10-studies-2020>

Treatment and Intervention Services for Autism Spectrum Disorder website from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention provides an overview of types of treatments, and behavioral, developmental, educational, and social-relational approaches.

<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/treatment.html>

US Botanical Garden offers sensory bags for individuals with autism spectrum disorders to borrow, using its website- accessibility page to identify these services.

<https://www.usbg.gov/accessibility-usbg>

Wilmot Gardens Therapeutic Horticulture Program has therapeutic horticulture for individuals with autism spectrum disorder.

<https://wilmotgardens.med.ufl.edu/2017/03/13/uf-medical-guild-grant-awarded-to-therapeutic-horticulture-program/>

Related organizations

[Autism Treatment Network](#)

[Center for Autism & Related Disabilities at University of South Florida \(CARD\)](#)

[National Clearinghouse on Autism Evidence and Practice \(NCAEP\)](#)

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