

## TH Activity Plan – Unusual Plants – Sensory Stimulation

Text by Mikkele Lawless & Lesley Fleming, HTR

Photo by A. Darrington/Alamy (Candy Cane Sorrel) & Bizarre Botanicals (Baby Toes)



**ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION:** Participants will be introduced to unusual plants & participate in sensory stimulation with them.

**THERAPEUTIC GOALS:**

**Cognitive/Intellectual:** Expand plant knowledge; recall plant names; expand creative thinking

**Physical:** Practice passing items/plants around group; strengthen lateral arm movement & pincer grip

**Psychological/Emotional:** Explore concepts of adaptation & survival metaphors for plants & humans

**Sensory:** Develop autonomic & appropriate responses to sensations; address sensory defensiveness to sensory inputs

**Social:** Work cooperatively in a group; practice prosocial communication/behavior; use humor as a coping mechanism

**Materials**

A variety of plants with different textures, colors, growth habits

Gloves, wipes



**STEP-BY-STEP PROCESS:**

1. **Pre-Session Preparation:** Gather unusual plants.
2. Facilitator begins session by introducing unusual plants like Venus fly trap, air plants & a Baby Boo pumpkin. Share some horticultural facts, & pass plants around for sensory stimulation, the focus of the session.
3. To maximize sensory stimulation, facilitator can use prompts & guided imagery such as: touch the leaves/flowers, smell the plant, listen to the plant as you stroke its leaves. One technique is to have each participant have a plant at their spot as these prompts are verbalized. Then pass the plants to the person beside them so that the plants make the full circle in the group. Option: have 2 of the same plants to reduce length of time if appropriate (& if attention spans are limited).
4. Facilitator asks participants what plants they think are unusual. Plant photos can prompt responses to bolster engagement; participants may not know name of plants but can point/share/voice their choices for unusual plants.
5. [Playing some games](#) in the session, facilitator can ask participants to name plants with animals in their names, or black plants, or plants that make them laugh (soft, weird texture, multi-colored for example).
6. Using photos if live plants are not available, share some real plant names like Red Hot Poker. Or ask participants to give a name to the unusual plant...hopefully laughter will ensue with some crazy, outrageous names.

**APPLICATIONS FOR POPULATIONS:** Sensory stimulation is an essential element in TH practice. Making this the focus of this session, using weird plants, can elevate the cognitive and sensory aspects regardless of population, health challenges or indoor/outdoor session location. Therapeutic goals can be selected based on client need.

Sensory stimulation provides multiple benefits including cognitive and motor skills development, emotional regulation, increased socialization and social interactions, increased focus and attention, and management of anxiety. Ideally all eight of the senses would be engaged during therapeutic use of sensory stimulation, engaging participants in an interesting manner that work towards health improvements (Healthline, 2025).

For people with sensory integration challenges, practice developing autonomic and appropriate responses to sensations, or addressing sensory defensiveness to sensory inputs may be incorporated into the session. Gloves may be an appropriate accommodation for some. For individuals with deficits in tactile or visual senses, using unusual plants can make practice strengthening skills in these sensory areas more interesting. Plant adaptations to environments, or survival strategies for plants can lead to discussions of human adaptations, heredity characteristics and coping strategies, with therapeutic goals from the psychological domain.

**SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS: Facilitators are responsible for knowing poisonous and toxic plants and plant parts.** Avoid the following plants where sap or ingestion can be poisonous: Spiderwort (*Tradescantia sillamontana*), Elephanthead Lousewort (*Pedicularis groenlandica*), Gloriosa Lily (*Gloriosa superba*), and Sensitive plant (*Mimosa pudica*) with leaves that fold up when touched.

**NOTES OR OTHER CONSIDERATIONS:** Unusual plants: Candy Cane Sorrel (*Oxalis versicolor*) mimics colors of candy canes and is often a houseplant; Spider Orchid (*Brassia*) looks like a skinny starfish; Red Hot Poker (*Kniphofia*) with tubular florets in a variety of colors has a fun name; Baby Toes succulent (*Fenestraria rhopalophylla*) has chubby leaves with translucent windows at its tips; Polka Dot Begonia (*Begonia maculata* var. *wightii*) has striking leaves with ruffled edges with mild toxicity for small children and pets.

Black Plants	Weird Shaped Plants
Black Bat flower ( <i>Tacca chantrieri</i> ) -looks like a bat	Chinese Fleeceflower (He Shou Wu) ( <i>Reynoutria multiflora</i> ) - roots shaped like human beings or body parts
Black Mondo Grass ( <i>Ophiopogon planiscapus</i> 'Nigrescens')	Bleeding Tooth Fungus ( <i>Hydnellum peckii</i> ) - releases red blood-like liquid
<i>Sambucus nigra</i> 'Black Lace'	Witches' hair ( <i>Cuscuta</i> spp.) - mass of tangled spaghetti-like substance hanging from trees
<i>Dyckia</i> 'Cherry Cola' bromeliad	Cojoined vegetables (squash, tomatoes etc.)

Related THADs: [Games with Weird & Wonderful Names](#), [Polka Dot Plant Propagation](#), and [Fascination with Fasciation](#).

#### REFERENCES/ RESOURCES:

Fleming, L., & Hildinger, T. (2025). [TH activity plan – Polka dot plant propagation](#). University of Florida Therapeutic Horticulture Activities Database.  
Fleming, L. (2024). [TH activity plan – Games with weird & wonderful plants](#). University of Florida Therapeutic Horticulture Activities Database.  
Healthline. (2025). [Sensory input and techniques](#). Healthline.com.  
Helmer, J. (2024). [18 bizarre, unusual and weird plants](#). Birds and Blooms.com.  
Missouri Botanical Garden. (n.d.). [Plant oddities](#). Missouri Botanical Garden.org.

Edits were made for THAD purposes in 2025.

TH Activity Plan form developed by Lesley Fleming, Susan Morgan and Kathy Brechner (2012), revised in 2025.