

Low Allergen Gardens

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Gardening

Gardening can be an enjoyable hobby or occupation for anybody, but people with asthma and hay fever need to be aware that gardens can also be a source of allergens and triggers.

Pollens, mould, spores, dust and strong scents can all cause problems for some people. For those who love gardening, it can be extremely frustrating to have your symptoms triggered by some or all of the above.

It is impossible to remove such triggers from your garden completely. However, there is a lot that you can do to make sure you come into contact with as few of them as possible. Asthma UK developed the low allergen garden concept to demonstrate how this could be achieved.

Asthma UK's low allergen gardens

Asthma UK, as the National Asthma Campaign, exhibited the first low allergen garden at the 1993 Chelsea Flower Show. The garden was designed by Lucy Huntington, with the help and advice of leading allergy experts and doctors.

Two further low allergen gardens have been exhibited at the Chelsea Flower Show both of which were awarded the Silver Gilt Medal.

Asthma UK now has two permanent Low Allergen Gardens: one at Capel Manor, Bullsmoor Lane, Enfield, Middlesex EN1 4RQ and one at Probus Gardens, Probus, Truro TR2 4HQ (both designed by Lucy Huntington).

The advice in this factfile is based on many of the principles applied in the low allergen gardens.

How do I know what triggers my hay fever or asthma?

Researchers have identified many different types of pollen spores that can trigger allergic reactions. Some people's symptoms will be triggered by just one or two of them. Others will be affected by more.

Allergies vary from one person to another, and different people might be affected by different plants, so it is best not to buy too many of one plant until you have determined what is 'safe' for you.

Asthma UK's *Take Control of Your Asthma* booklet has more information about identifying your triggers.



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What sort of plants, shrubs and trees should I try to avoid?

The most important rule for a low allergen garden is to avoid all wind-pollinated plants. The pollen from these plants tends to be small and light, travels on the wind and is easily inhaled, thus causing problems for people sensitive to pollens. However, where female cultivars are available in wind-pollinated trees and shrubs, these are appropriate to use.

Wind-pollinated plants include many trees, all grasses and some wild flowers.

Choose insect-pollinated plants because the pollen in these plants tends to be sticky and heavy and does not easily become airborne, thus posing less of a problem to people with allergies. Most flowers with large petals are insect-pollinated, but it is important to remember not to smell these plants as wind pollen can be deposited on the petals of any flower.

Avoid heavily scented flowers which may occasionally trigger attacks in people with asthma, due to their irritant effects. These include: carnations; jasmine; wisteria; freesias and hyacinths.

As most herbs are insect-pollinated many are acceptable. However, drying herbs is best done outdoors.

The daisy family, which includes chrysanthemums, michaelmas daisies and dahlias, can cause a problem and should be avoided.

May I use shrubs and trees?

Shrubs are insect-pollinated and are also easy to maintain. Some varieties are heavily scented, though, so it is probably best to choose one which is lightly scented and even then it is best to plant such shrubs away from the house. Avoid climbing plants around bedroom windows as pollens and dust can collect on the leaves and blow into rooms when there is a breeze.

Many common trees are wind-pollinated, so it is best to avoid ash, birch, elder, hazel, horse chesnut, oak, plane, sycamore, willow and yew. All these trees produce masses of pollen during the early summer and can cause problems. Blossom trees are usually insect-pollinated, but choose one which is lightly scented.

Most of the plants associated with pools are not likely to cause allergic reactions. However, arum lily is an exception and may trigger symptoms. The water itself should not cause a problem if it runs smoothly (eg as a waterfall) but fountains may cause pollen and dust to become airborne.

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What else can I do in my low allergen garden?

Lawns – If possible replace the lawn with attractive paving or synthetic grass matting. Lawns harbour all kinds of pollen, dust and moulds, which become airborne when disturbed, particularly when mown. If grass cannot be avoided it is best to use a cylinder mower for cutting the lawn. Let an allergy-free member of the family do the mowing. It is important to close all the windows of the house prior to mowing and keep them closed for a few hours afterwards.

Hedges – Hedges are a problem as pollens, dust and moulds collect in the branches and when the wind blows or the hedge is cut, clouds of allergens are released into the surrounding air. Attractive painted fencing or trellis can be used as an alternative. A brick or stone wall may also be appropriate, if more expensive.

Water gardens – If building a water feature into the garden make sure it is safe for small children and do not use a fountain as falling water can create air currents that cause pollens and dust to rise and become airborne. However, a smooth running waterfall should not cause additional movement in the air. Pool plants, except for the arum lily, do not usually cause allergies.

Pots – These can create an attractive feature in any garden and can be used extensively in low allergen gardens. Do not bring pots into the house during the winter as moulds in the soil will release their spores in the warmth of the house.

Weeding – It is important to remember that the nose and mouth are near to the plants and ground when weeding, which is why it is important to have plants that do not cause any allergic reaction. Plant low-allergen ground-cover plants such as vinca, ajuga, lamium and hostas as they suppress the weeds. In addition, cover bare earth areas with a gravel mulch that can also suppress weeds.

Compost – Moulds build up in compost and rotting vegetation so make sure that all waste vegetation is placed in plastic bags and removed from the garden. Do not use any form of bought compost as these can also harbour mould.

Is there a good time to garden?

The pollen season starts in February/March with the tree pollens. These give way to grass pollen from late May to mid-August. Wild flowers such as plantain tend to release their pollens from June to late September. Moulds (fungi) lie dormant during the winter and come alive in the spring, particularly in July and August, and remain active until well into October or until the first frost.

It is possible to check the grass pollen count daily. To see how high the pollen count is on a particular day look at the weather forecast in a daily newspaper, on Ceefax or Teletext (page 156), or listen to the weather forecast on local radio or TV news. For more information contact the Air Pollution Information Service: www.airquality.co.uk; aqinfo@aeat.co.uk.



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Is there a good time to garden? (continued)

On fine, sunny, summer mornings pollen grains rise up in the convection currents high into the clouds. However, as the temperature reduces later in the day the pollens begin to fall and can cause a problem for people with asthma and hay fever. So bear in mind that at ground level, pollen counts may be highest in the evening rather than in the hotter part of the day. Prior to summer thunderstorms, it is best to stay in the house with the windows closed as atmospheric changes may cause pollens to break down into tiny particles that are airborne and can very easily be inhaled into the airway and cause an asthma attack.

Alternatively, consider a low maintenance garden with paving, shrubs and gravel mulch. The majority of work on this type of garden can be done in March, before the pollen season begins.

Practical tips

- Always wear a hat when gardening to protect your hair from pollens and brush your hair after gardening.
- Using spectacles or sunglasses can help to reduce pollen contact with your eyes.
- If you have a skin allergy, be sure to keep arms, legs and hands well covered.
- Do not wear gardening clothes in the house as garden allergens cling to clothes.
- Consult your doctor if you think you need to increase your medicine when gardening. There are non-sedative treatments for the relief of hay fever.
- Picked flowers should be shaken well to rid them of allergens.

Some suggestions for plants

Trees: Prunus 'Shirofugen'

Shrubs: Aucuba japonica, Phormium 'Bronze Baby', Hebe 'Mrs Winder', Prunus x Cistena, Viburnum lusitanica, Viburnum sargentii, Buxus Cryptomeria japonica, 'Elegans', Prunus lusitanica 'Variegata'

Climbers: Clematis, Vitis

Herbaceous Plants: Acanthus, Alchemilla mollis, Aquilegia, Astilbe Aruncus, Brunnera, Campanula, Dicentra, Delphinium, Geum Perennial geranium, Hemerocallis, Hosta, Iris, Polemonium, Pulmonaria, Rodgersia Salvia, Saxifraga, Sisyrinchium, Tiarella, Tradescantia, Trollium, Veronica, Viola

Annuals: Antirrhinum, Eschscholzia, Impatiens, Mimulus, Nigella



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