



# REEP

Religions & Environment  
Education Projects

## Creating a Sensory Garden for the Visually Impaired in Marrakech

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The project for me started back in December when I received the email regarding Shore to Shore and the REEP charity, requesting volunteers. It arrived the day I'd returned back to work following a delightful holiday in Marrakech, so clearly it caught my attention! Following a recce trip to Morocco I started coming up with designs for the sensory garden at OAPAM. This garden is part of a larger project with the British Moroccan Society to help improve teaching and learning in a school for blind and visually impaired children in Marrakech. REEP is [assisting the school with its] gardens and developing associated learning. The school at OAPAM is residential, the ages range from 5-17 and at least 65% of the teachers are blind or partially sighted. The Sensory Garden has an existing cloister garden, the building itself is around 30 years old and designed with the blind in mind.

The garden was largely filled with overgrown citrus trees and two concrete paths making a staggered cross. The design tried to include all of the citrus trees, a sensory walk that included all the senses and elements, raised beds for planting herbs and other scented plants and seating for somewhere to meet and relax.

Our first job was to prune all of the citrus trees, not an easy task as they have two-inch long spikes! In addition to this, we found ourselves negotiating with the local orange blossom harvesters who could only converse in Arabic and who genuinely thought we were about to destroy their crops.

Purchasing materials was also a priority and this can be a very long task as the Moroccans like to barter. The Eucalyptus that we used to make the central raised bed was bought in three metre long poles and cut long ways in two. This made both a striking visual centrepiece, as well as a tactile one, which the children were quick to explore. In fact the children at the school were always inquisitive, keen to know what we were doing. The

power tools were very new to them and especially the sounds they made, keeping one or two constantly intrigued. So, towards the end of the Eucalyptus marathon I manage to get one of the children to screw in the screws with the drill, this was met with great joy and giggles. Following this triumph, I attempted to facilitate one of the children in mowing the lawn and from here things really got interesting! Later, I had to resort to removing the spark plugs to avoid competitive children who were completely blind from careering up and down the garden at the helm of a runaway lawnmower! The giggles and excitement produced by such a seemingly simple pleasure made me realise that the garden was far more important than I'd ever imagined.

Surrounding the raised bed was a raised square potager, which was built from timber planks (in a far more forgiving Swedish pine!). In between the two planters was an area for seating and an interesting under-foot experience. We used olive and pepper tree trunks as seating and argan nut husks for the children to feel with their feet.

To get the children really involved in their garden we had planting party. Where they planted up the raised beds in the garden, sowed the seeds and watered it all in. Accompanied by the wider members of the Shore to Shore project we had a mini-opening of this, the first part of the garden, and I left Morocco singing traditional Sufi songs and hearing the children's laughter ringing in my ears. I can't wait to return to see more of this project realised.



