



Natural Playscapes

Creating Outdoor Play Environments for the Soul

by Rusty Keeler





Sunflowers

From small seed to giant flower, sunflowers are a perfect natural playscape plant; they can do so much and yet are inexpensive. Children can be a part of the whole life cycle of the flower by first planting the seeds in early spring, seeing them sprout, and then watching the plants grow and tower above them as the season moves on. Some people create flowery green screens in front of chain link fences, or get a little wilder and plant in circles or squares to make fancy sunflower houses. Leave an opening for a door and place stumps inside as seats and you have the ultimate 'living room.' People also plant them in challenging mazes – a living labyrinth that changes with the seasons. Just imagine the difference between walking the maze in springtime, summer, fall, or winter . . .





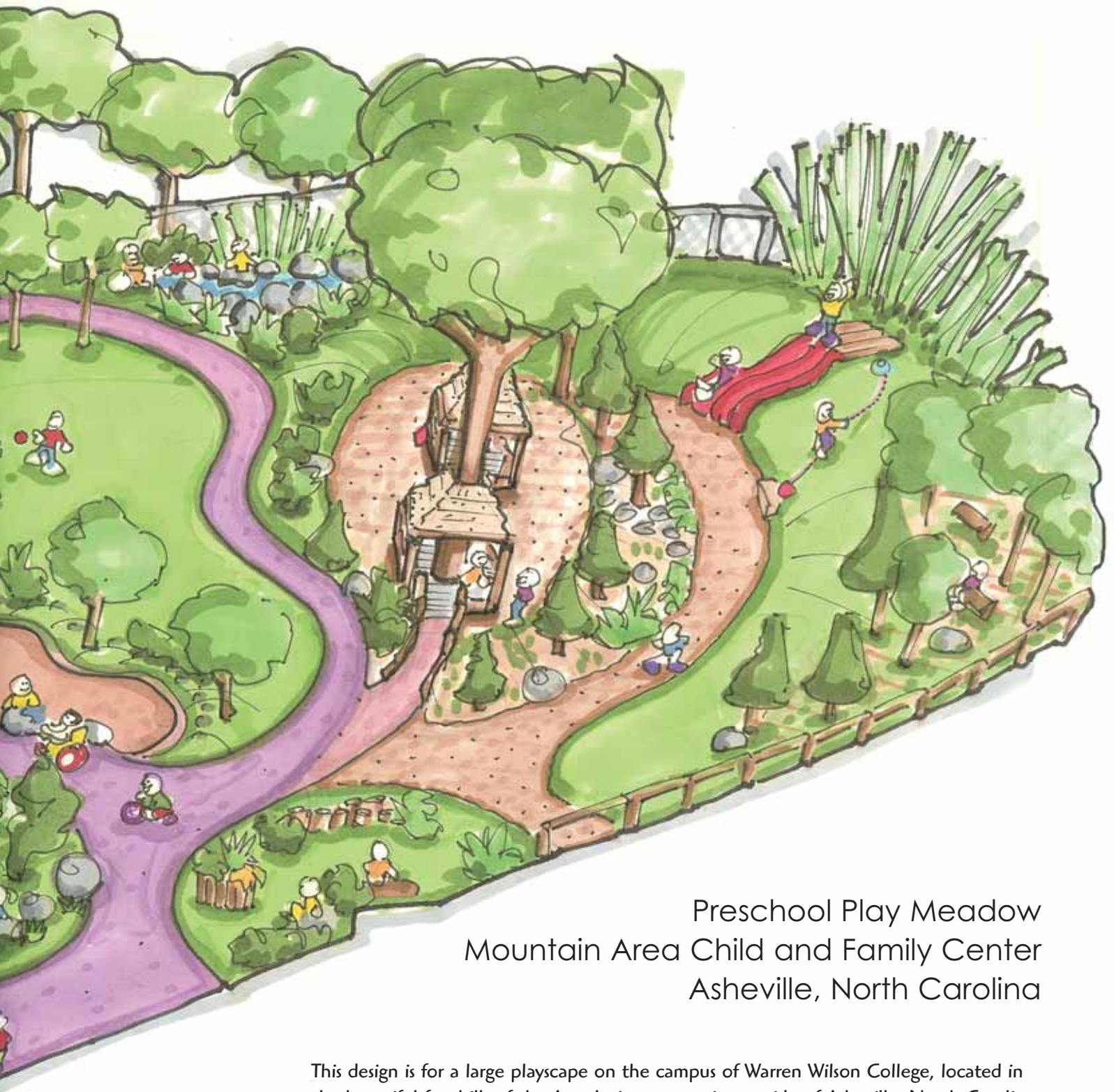
Sound

“Plink, platter, plunk, play.” There are many ways to create a ‘soundscape’ on your playscape. Think about how you can add loud sounds, soft sounds, big sounds, and small sounds. Vary the materials to include metallic sounds, wood sounds, bamboo sounds, and even natural sounds of trickling water and plants that shudder in the wind. Windchimes can create soothing ambient background atmosphere to the playscape. Bells and chimes can be installed in shrubs or on fences to jingle when children rush by. Larger-scaled outdoor instruments such as thunder drums or giant marimbas can be used as the goal of play. Honor your children by using instruments made of rich materials that resonate in the body.





PLAY MEADOW



Preschool Play Meadow Mountain Area Child and Family Center Asheville, North Carolina

This design is for a large playscape on the campus of Warren Wilson College, located in the beautiful foothills of the Appalachian mountains outside of Asheville, North Carolina. After years of dreaming, a group of dedicated community members and college staff proposed a plan to build a beautiful, high quality early education center that would serve infants through preschoolers with a range of special needs and socio-economic levels. The center would also be a lab school of the college's education department with college students involved in all aspects of teaching. With a commitment to providing a nurturing environment for children and their families, the group looked to build an outdoor space that mirrored their goals for the indoors and felt like home.



Therapeutic Playscape

Whatcom Center for Early Learning
Bellingham, Washington

Bellingham, Washington is one of the uppermost northwest cities in the United States and is home to a bay, mountains, boats, gardeners, builders, artists, and the Whatcom Center for Early Learning — a small public center for young children with special needs, birth to three years old. This center dreamed of a playscape loaded with sensory experiences so that their children may experience the space in a multitude of ways. They wanted to include local materials, so one thing we did was use driftwood from their bay. Small pieces were used decoratively throughout the yard, and large chunks of driftwood were used as balancing and seating areas. All for free. One community volunteer was a native plant expert and selected locally-growing plants such as pine trees, herbs, and ornamental grasses. We used a raised planter to bring the plants up to belly height for standing people, which is also the perfect height for people in wheelchairs. It is also nice for older grandparents who may visit the yard; so they don't need to bend over to touch or smell the flowers. A playscape can be a great place to provide multi-generational possibilities.

Sensory surfaces

Along with a variety of sensory plants and gardens, we also varied the ground surfaces that the children walk or tricycle on. Instead of paths made only from concrete or asphalt, we created walkways from flagstone, brick, woodchips, and stepping stones. Volunteers found an interesting set of concrete stepping stones molded to look like tree sections, complete with growth rings and bark! In between each 'stump' we planted moss and creeping thyme. These spaces have since filled in with green, and when a child walks the stepping stone path, the scent of thyme rises in the air.

Not only do these surfaces provide beautiful visual and textural variations in the playscape, but they also suggest different ways for children to move their bodies as they move from place to place. The children may run vigorously across the flat asphalt tricycle track, hop along from one stepping stone to another, delicately tiptoe between brickwork, jump from flagstone to



flagstone, and then walk quietly over the hushed wood chip path. The materials and patterning of the different surfaces invite children to move at different speeds with different actions, using different muscles. Also, when you vary the textures, you are also changing the *mood* of each space. It *feels* different to be on a square of brick than it does on the round stepping stones. The pavement feels different from the flagstone. Each mood and feeling creates a unique sense of place. These places may feel safe, exciting, hushed, wild, challenging, or relaxing. Different types of play and different emotions will occur and feel at home in each place.



Hillside

We built a small hill and planted a durable plastic slide in the side of it. Whimsical and inviting, these slides are also safer than typical slides because a child will only land on the grass at slide level if they spill out. A deck is located at the top for pre-sliding sit-down preparation, and a bed of wood chips waits at the bottom as a soft landing pad. The hill allows for a variety of body movements and muscles as children run up, crawl up, roll down, or slide down. The top and bottom of the



slide are also key areas for a fragrant herb to be planted.

A playscape oasis

Other details include handrails for children to grab hold of as they practice walking and improve their mobility. The railings are located along the flat tricycle track, the outdoor classroom deck, the accessible ramp, and the 'wobbly walk' leading to the playhouse. A sand and water sculpture crafted from local boulders was placed in the ground and a mini 'tree house' was built around an existing mature Lilac tree. Windchimes were hung, bells were hidden, and a flagpole was planted allowing children and teachers to raise and lower a flag. The playscape is also an oasis for parents, new to the experience of raising a child with special needs. The outdoor classroom deck has a trellis over top to provide shade and a relaxing spot to sit and watch the teachers and therapists work with their child. The parents can, of course, be included, but may also enjoy watching from the sidelines. A plastic Talk Tube runs from the classroom deck to the tree house so parents can have a 'long distance' conversation with their children as they play. "Hi Mommy. I see you!"

Whatcom Center for Early Learning

Bellingham, Washington • **Candy Meacham, occupational therapist, ESL teacher and weaver:**

When we began to think about what we wanted in a playscape at Whatcom Center for Early Learning, we were struck by how little opportunity many of our children had to spend time outdoors. We were committed to providing an outdoor space that our very young kids with disabilities could access and enjoy, a space that would challenge them physically and nourish them spiritually. We wanted a landscape with beauty and a variety of textures, shapes, spaces, levels, smells, and feels. Our natural playscape has truly met all these challenges admirably. Built in 1998, it is still beautiful and functional today. About 75 volunteers came together over a three-day weekend and transformed our ugly little yard into a magical landscape of hills and dales, paths and platforms, and a playhouse. The build was infused with a fantastic spirit of excitement and cooperation. We built our playscape using some local materials including river rock and driftwood gleaned from local beaches. Later we added a deck with a grape arbor for parents.





Mekeel Childcare Center

East Stroudsburg University
East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania

You saw Mekeel Childcare Center's finished playscape in the last chapter. Here Michelle shares how she did it:

Mekeel Childcare Center

East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania • **Michelle Hoffman**

Mekeel Child Care Center began with its staff. Each teacher talked about what they would like outdoors and also what the children had said they would like to have on their playscape. Some presented pictures that some of their students had drawn. We also talked about the type of people we needed on board and how we could propose this to them. We started with the parents at Mekeel, university members, and then the outside community. First we sent a letter stating our endeavor and asked for replies if they were interested in serving on the committee. We ended up with a committee of four parents (all of whom also worked at ESU in various capacities), the president of Mekeel's advisory board, the head of ESU's grounds department, Mekeel staff, and myself. At our first meeting, we established goals and how to move forward. We needed go-getters, responsible people to handle specific jobs.

And we got them. Each person on the committee had a specific job. For example, one parent was strictly responsible for finances — she was also an ESU employee who just happened to oversee campus projects. Another parent was responsible for spreading

the word on campus about volunteers needed to actually build the project. Committee members reported their progress at each meeting.

Mekeel staff had gathered support from parents and the university by sending bulletins and getting the word out that there was a worthwhile event taking place and to come join in the fun. Mekeel has always had a great group of parents who really care about their children's early care, so parent volunteers were not hard to come by. The university community was also very excited and offered donations left and right.

All the committee members helped plan the build. The meetings were very useful to share information and then make sure that everyone agreed to the next steps. I was considered the 'general contractor' of the job and what a huge undertaking this was! Making sure that everything fell together when it was supposed to was the hardest and most stressful part. I would stress that you need people on board who can handle responsibility and who you can have confidence in when you're delegating jobs. Being in early childhood education, I knew that things don't always go according to plan, so being flexible was helpful as well.

After months of organizing, it was finally time to complete the outdoor prep work before the volunteers came in to do their share. One glitch right off the bat was the person who volunteered to dig pier holes did



not do it when scheduled, which then was going to throw off the timing for the next person who had volunteered to pour concrete. You learn to deal with setbacks as they come up! After my husband – a contractor – stepped in to complete the pier holes, we were back on our way.

School was still in session as the build took place during four consecutive days. I was at the site every day and the staff took turns coming over to help volunteer. We had set up a volunteer list, so we knew who was coming when. Many community groups participated, such as fraternities, sororities, vocational and technical students from the local schools, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, Kiwanis Club and others, as well as local builders and contractors in various trades. They were working with many people throughout the build – most of them novices. We assigned each group a 'project to complete' and the clubs and volunteers teamed up with a professional builder.



Of course we had to feed the hard-working crowd. One committee member was in charge of food and had prepared by asking local businesses for donations. Again, we referred to our volunteer list so we had an idea of about how many people we would need to feed each day.

Before the build, we sent out a press release both in our community and on the college campus to announce our undertaking. The media – newspaper as well as television crews – covered our build from start to finish and helped us put out the word.





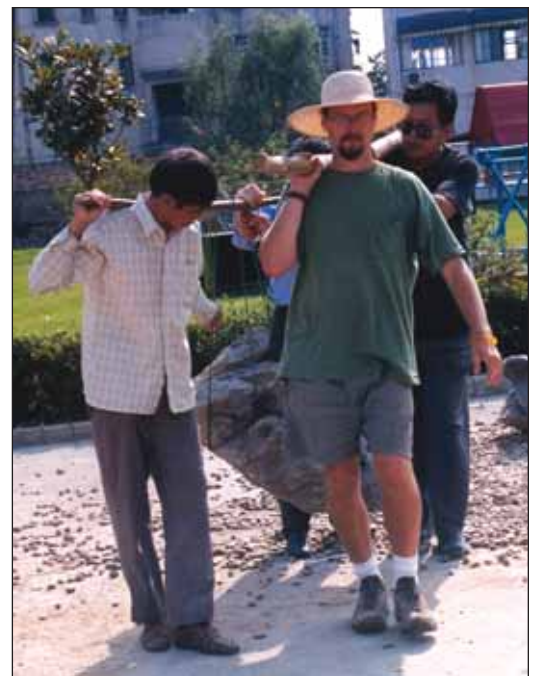
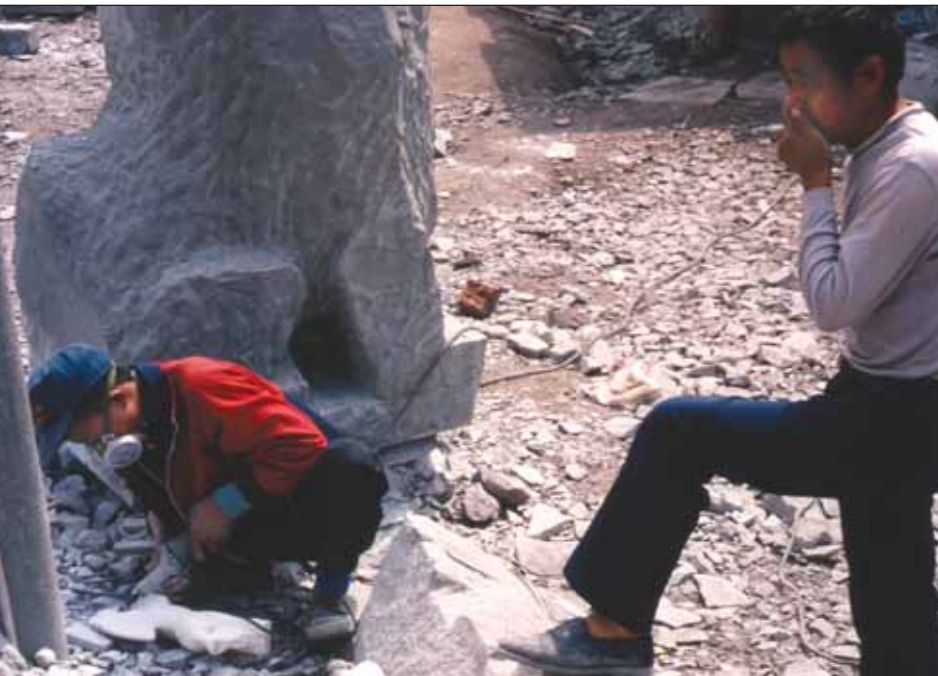
I would do the build again in a heartbeat. It was so much fun! We were ready to work in rain and shine. Creating our playscape was a huge undertaking and I am very proud that our committee was able to accomplish something so wonderful. The children at Mekeel are not the only ones who like the playscape. I often find university faculty and staff members walking through the gates and smelling our herbs in the garden, admiring our flower garden, and sitting on our swing underneath the trellis. It is a safe haven not only for our children, but others as well.







few for the children and even helped us move them into place with their rickety tractor. At another site a local nurseryman fell so in love with the project that he donated all the trees and shrubs we wanted and brought a team of his workers to help us plant them. Television and newspaper crews came to capture images of our unique crew and mission: Americans traveling across the globe during their vacations to dig in the mud to help Chinese kids. The stories touched people's hearts and people came from all over to join us, including government officials, ladies' service groups, nearby farmers, and English-speaking college students who helped translate. Many hands and hearts worked together for a beautiful cause. . . .





Ready?

The following section will guide you through the beginning steps of a playscape project: from brainstorming and community resource assessment through drawing your Master Plan. It will help you look at your community in a new way and ask two key questions: What locally-obtained materials can we use for our playscape? And who in our community can help us realize our dream?

The best way to use this brainstorming guide is to first form a team of interested and excited people who will make up the first part of your playscape committee: the dreamers. These people could be friends, parents, grandparents, staff, and any other interested folks from your community who have energy and a creative spirit. Put the word out and set up a meeting. You may want to photocopy pages from this section (242-243 and 246-249) and pass them out to the group. Break into small groups if you need to or work together. These brainstorming sessions are the time for 'blue sky thinking,' so don't be afraid to let the ideas flow — even if you don't yet know how they could be realized.

In other words: Go for it. Be positive. Get creative. Support other people's ideas. Imagine the possibilities.....

1

Brainstorming and Assessing

The best way to have a good idea is to have lots of ideas.

Linus Pauling

The first step is to think about all your potential resources. What you imagine now will be used as your 'design palette' from which to create your design. If you know that there are nursery experts who give away Maple trees, include them on your Master Plan. If there is a local artist who makes fantastical whirligigs, those could be a part of the project, too. Now is the time to start thinking about all the possible resources in your area.

Directions:

Photocopy the pages from this section and hand them out to your group. Each page walks you through a different aspect of assessing your community. This process will help you imagine how your playscape can reflect your area and how the community can help you build it. If your playscape is going to be children's introduction to the outside world, first you must visualize the world where you live, what the local features are, and who are the talented residents that live there, too!

On the page **YOUR ENVIRONMENT**, answer the questions to put your landscape and local environment into focus.

The **NATURAL RESOURCES** page will ask you to imagine what parts of this landscape could be recreated on your playscape or brought directly onto the playscape.

A fun element of this section is creating a **PORTFOLIO OF PLACE**. Get out your spy camera and go on inspirational field trips in your local area. City parks, state forests, children's museums, and botanical gardens all have something to teach us. Click pictures and make a bulletin board of inspiring materials and spaces from the place where you live. You may be surprised by what you discover!

Next it's time to think about the **PEOPLE RESOURCES** in your neighborhood. Who do you know who could help your project? What community connections might your 'dream team' have and what networks could you tap into for guidance, donations, labor, and love?

Don't forget about **MAINTENANCE**. The level of ongoing maintenance you will be able to give your environment will make a big difference in the type of space you design — but it doesn't all have to be done by you! Be creative and brainstorm alternative ways to maintain your beautiful yard.

Last, but not least, are your **PLAYSCAPE DREAMS**. What do you want your outdoor space to be? What kinds of activities, features, and opportunities do you want the children to experience? Write them down!

5 *Nearly Free* Do-It-Yourself PLAYSCAPE PROJECTS

Here are five simple projects to start you on your way toward a multi-sensory natural playscape. They're not difficult or complex. They just take a little bit of creativity and time. Alter them to suit your own needs and licensing requirements. Do you have any parents who could help you? Spirited staff? Don't forget to include children in the process.

1. Sunflower House — This project is about planting sunflowers in a square, circle, or any other shape you'd like, to create a living playhouse for hiding and hanging out. A true 'living' room. Beautiful! You can use plants other than sunflowers, of course. Rows of corn would make a nice set of walls, too. If this year's sunflower experiment works out well and the children love it, you could create a permanent living room by planting trees or shrubs in the same layout. An apple tree house perhaps?

2. Willow Dome — Here's a permanent 'living' room, made from willow. Willow structures have been grown for centuries all over the world. They are remarkably easy and rewarding to plant; I can't think of a better thing to put on a playscape or backyard. The trick is to plant it in WINTER so that when spring rolls around the willow will start sprouting new roots and leaves. As your Willow Dome grows, take cuttings and plant another dome, tunnel, chair, or fence. Wow!

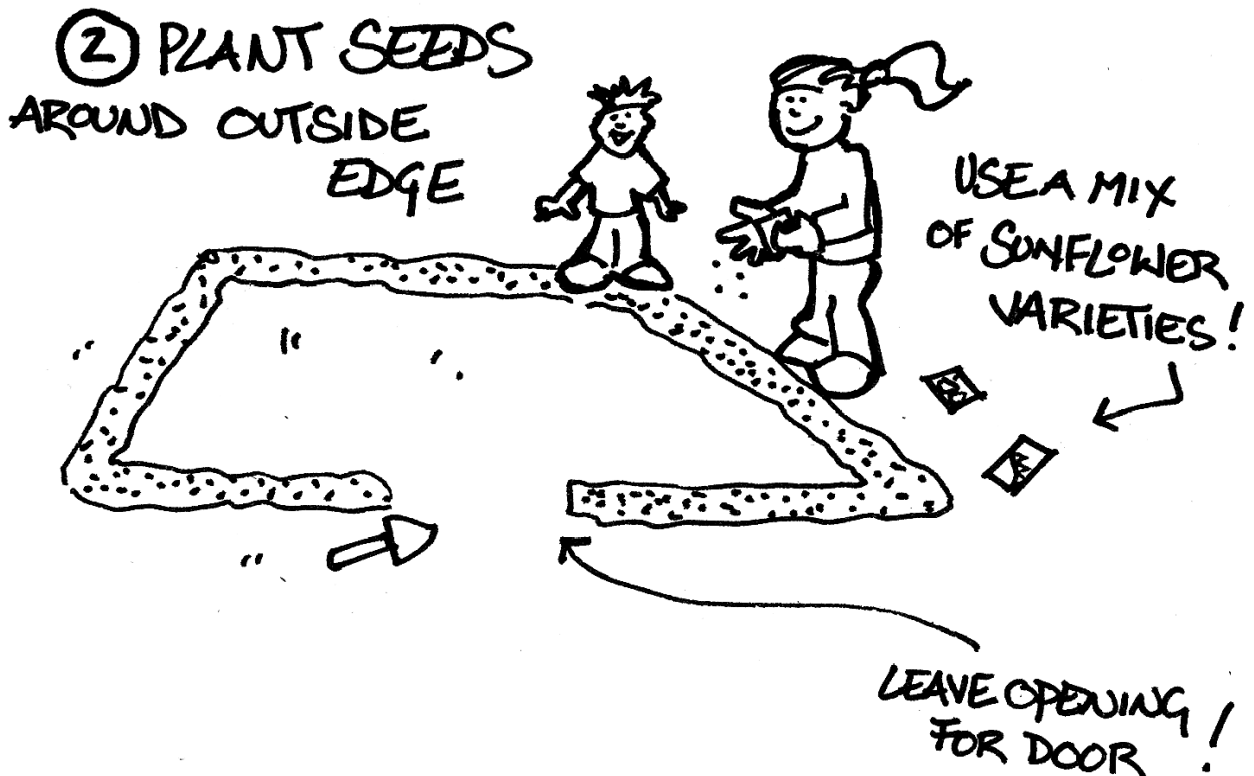
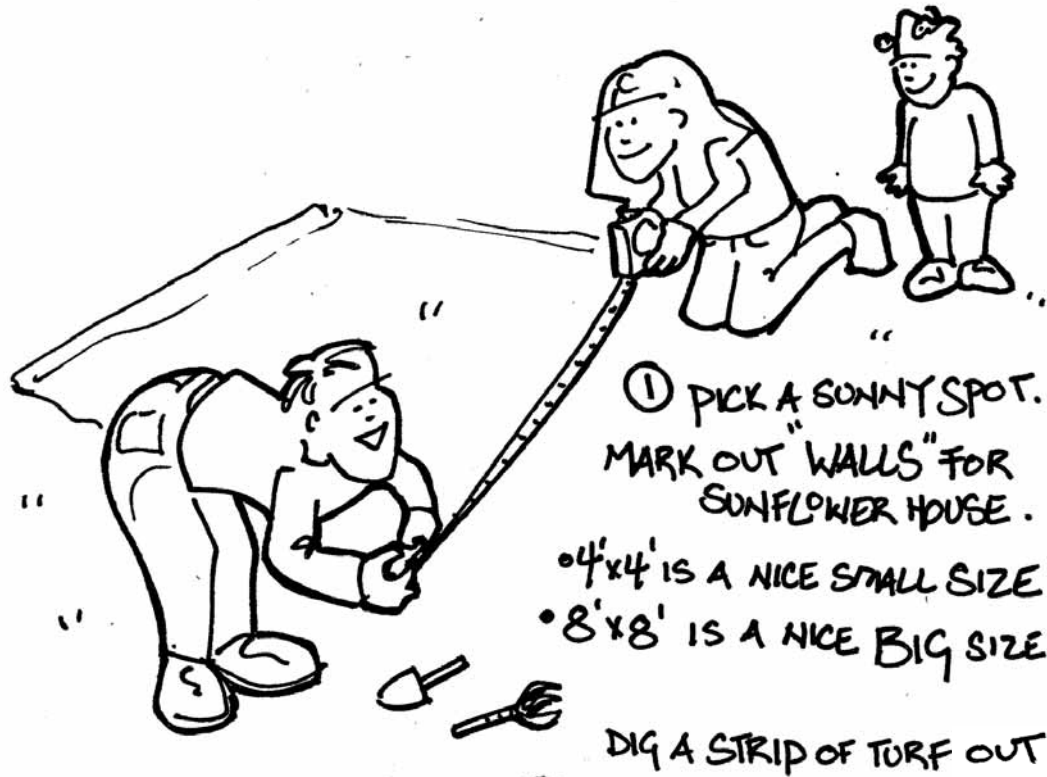
3. Mow a Meadow Maze — This project may be the easiest of all. The biggest step: do nothing. Let your lawn grow. Think about this: your lawn has a beautiful life

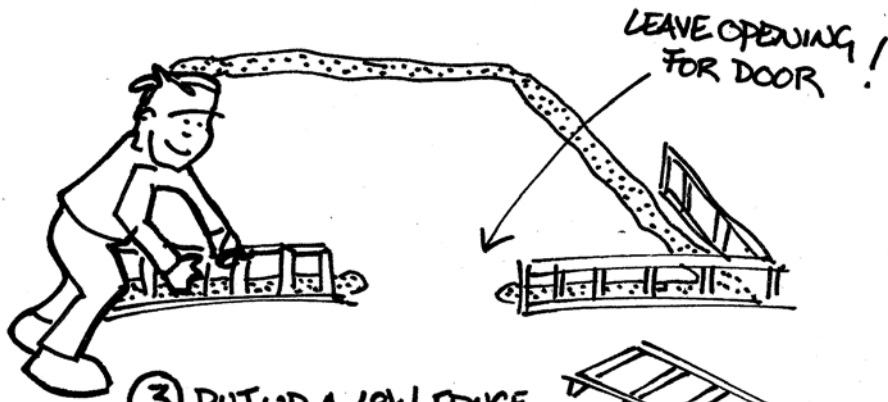
cycle that gets chopped short every time it gets mowed. Now you have a chance to not only celebrate the life of your lawn, but also create a fun, natural play space for your children in the process. With your very own lawnmower as a creative tool, you can carve out a maze, playhouse, village, or zigzaggy paths. You may even want to plant wildflowers or add native plants and grasses. Plants will grow, flowers will bloom, wildlife will appear, and children will play and learn about the natural world in an exciting new environment.

4. Plant Some Bulbs — Planting bulbs is a strange and mysterious experience, especially for children. It sounds crazy, but you take muddy onion/potato-looking things and stick them in the ground at the end of the growing season. Then you wait or forget about them and hunker down for winter. Tick tock tick tock, spring comes along and so does a pleasant surprise. Green shoots push out of the ground and then, before you know it: flowers! Be sure to plant the bulbs in strategic, fun ways that act as colorful accents to your playscape features and pathways.

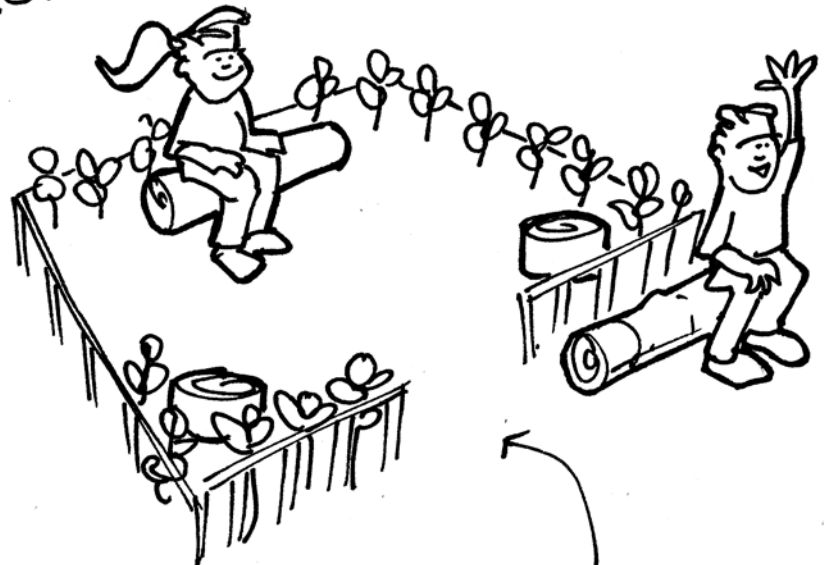
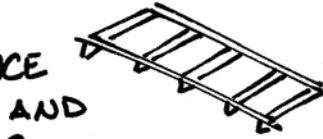
5. Boom Drums — This project is a bit more nuts-and-boltsy, but not too bad. And the results are booming! Take a few plastic barrels. Wash them. Trim them to whatever size you want (experiment with size and sound) and mount legs to the bottoms (or not — they will still sound interesting). You could also mount them permanently in the ground or bolt them to a fence. Or you could build a wooden stage and attach them as permanent features. Boom boom.

Sunflower House

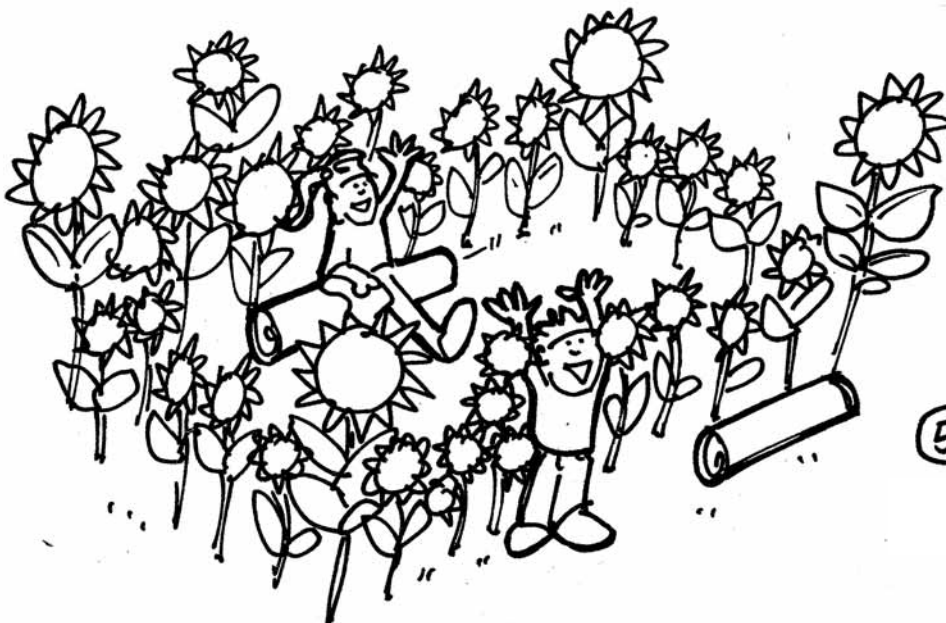




③ PUT UP A LOW FENCE TO MARK THE BORDER AND PROTECT SEEDLINGS.



④ PLACE BENCHES & TABLES INSIDE (LOGS & SMOOTH BOULDERS WORK NICELY)



⑤ ENJOY!

Research & Studies

There are many studies and research projects looking at the topic of children and nature. Whether you are doing your own research, writing articles, or need scientific 'proof' to help plead your natural playscape case, this short list of studies and sources will help point you in the right direction.

Organizations doing interesting research:

Natural Learning Initiative

North Carolina State University

www.naturalearning.org

Human-Environment Research Laboratory

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

www.herl.uiuc.edu

'Growing Up in Cities' Program

United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

www.unesco.org/most/guic/guicmain.htm

Project for Public Spaces

www.pps.org

Results:

- Children with nature nearby their homes are more resistant to stress; have lower incidence of behavioral disorders, anxiety, and depression; and have a higher measure of self-worth. The greater the amount of nature exposure, the greater the benefits (Wells & Evans, 2003).
- Spending time in nature has been shown to reduce stress and benefit treatment of numerous health conditions (Kahn, 1999).
- Symptoms of children with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) are relieved after contact with nature. The greener the setting, the more the relief. (Taylor et al., 2001).
- Children with views of and contact with nature score higher on tests of concentration and self-discipline. The greener, the better the scores (Wells, 2000; Grahn et al., 1997; Taylor et al., 2002).
- Children who play regularly in natural environments show more advanced motor fitness, including coordination, balance and agility, and they are sick less often (Grahn et al., 1997; Fjortoft & Sageie, 2001).
- When children play in natural environments, their play is more diverse. There is a higher prevalence of imaginative and creative play that fosters language and collaborative skills (Moore & Wong, 1997; Taylor et al., 1998; Fjortoft, 2000).
- Exposure to natural environments improves children's cognitive development by increasing their awareness, reasoning, and observational skills (Pyle, 2002).
- Play in a diverse natural environment reduces or eliminates bullying (Malone & Tranter, 2003).
- Nature helps children develop powers of observation and creativity, as well as a sense of peace and being at one with the world (Crain, 2001).
- Early experiences with the natural world have been positively linked with the development of imagination and the sense of wonder (Cobb, 1977; Louv, 1991).
- Wonder is an important motivator for lifelong learning (Wilson, 1997).
- Children who play in nature have more positive feelings about each other (Moore, 1996).
- Natural environments stimulate social interaction between children (Moore, 1986; Bixler et al., 2002).
- Play in outdoor environments stimulates all aspects of child development more readily than indoor environments (Moore & Wong, 1997).
- An affinity to and love of nature, along with a positive environmental ethic, grow out of regular contact with and play in the natural world during early childhood (Chawla, 1988; Wilson, 1993; Sobel, 1996, 2002 & 2004; Wilson, 1997; Kahn, 1999; Kals et al., 1999; Moore & Cosco, 2000; Bixler et al., 2002; Kals & Ittner, 2003; Schultz et al., 2004).

Hello, Planet Earth!



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