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Designing Kid-friendly Landscapes with Grown-up Appeal

Just because you have children doesn't mean sacrificing grown-up pleasures like entertaining or peaceful respites. With intelligent design, landscapes fulfill many requirements. If your children are very young, it may take flexibility and patience; but with forethought, outdoor play areas can be converted into places adults appreciate and enjoy. To help your garden evolve as your children mature, the American Nursery and Landscape Association (ANLA), offers the following suggestions.

Taming the Toy Parade

Is your backyard a sea of trikes, trucks, and toys? Why not incorporate a structure that stores toys and lets parents relax outside? Jane Riddle, owner of Lodi Farms Limited in Ann Arbor, Michigan, thinks gazebos fit the bill. Weatherproofed benches with storage do double duty as toy containers and seating areas. "By day, a gazebo is a fort or playhouse," Riddle says. By night, the magic continues if you hang a few candlelit lanterns and invite your friends. Planting clematis, jasmine or similar vines blends outdoor structures into their surroundings quickly. Many vines have intoxicating fragrance as well. Riddle advises using white or silvery plants near entertainment areas because of their after-dark appeal.

Hiding Places

Remember how great it was to retreat from the world, even as a child? Trees and plants are essential for kids. They not only entice wildlife into your yard, they create hiding places. Bamboo and other ornamental grasses planted to form tunnels are thrilling places to run through. Dwarf varieties of shrubbery grow low enough to allow you to watch children, but high enough to keep toys and play areas hidden from view. Jane Riddle offers an inexpensive way to meet children's nutritional and privacy needs: "Plant beans on a tepee frame. Like Jack's beanstalk, they'll quickly climb the frame and create a leafy green hiding space." In case you think your kids won't eat vegetables, Riddle suggests growing cherry tomatoes, "a kid's best friend." don't leave yourself out of the picture when developing private retreats. Create an outdoor oasis with comfortable seating and special accents. Section it off from family activity with a living screen—a fast growing hedge or vines planted on lattice fencing.

Water Babies

Children enjoy the splash and play potential of water. Adults find the sound and sight relaxing. Birds are attracted to water for drinking and bathing. Choose simple and safe instead of large, deepwater features. One family began with a bubble fountain, a pump, and an underground water reservoir. By threading an extension pipe through the center of a millstone, they created a safe yet inviting fountain their children can sit on and play around on hot days. This same method works with large smooth rocks. Speaking of water, if your kids have outgrown the wading pool, use it for a rainbow garden. Punch a few holes for drainage and fill with sterilized soil. Then plant some annual flowers in stripes, to form an arch. "Kids love watching the rainbow come into bloom," Riddle notes. The whole project is temporary discard it on the compost pile when the "rainbow" fades.

Sands of Time

Sandboxes can occupy children for hours. If you build a more permanent structure of cement or wood, it can be transformed into a raised flowerbed or water garden when sandbox days are a memory.

Come Out and Play

When selecting plants, Riddle has some basic 'do's and don'ts'. "Don't purchase delicate or thorny plants. Bee balm is bombproof and many ornamental grasses are soft, yet tough. Grow things that appeal to the senses—touchable varieties like lamb's ear or fragrant plants like herbs. Kids like plants with funny or interesting names. Butterfly bush is a good example because it lives up to its name."

With thoughtful planning, everyone can have an area to call his or her own. When considering your landscape, "realize what season of life you're in;" Riddle advises. If you're too busy chasing toddlers or carpooling to take on one more project, enlist the aid of a landscape designer. They'll help you evaluate present and future- needs and bring it all together into an appealing overall plan.

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