

It's a Kid's Yard

It used to be that kids were told “Go outside and don't come home till sunset”. With that nearby creeks, fields, forests, parks or gardens were transformed into very special and wondrous places where a child's imagination was acted out.

However, with television, computers, video games, organized activities and continuous fears of ‘stranger danger’, kids find themselves spending most of their time indoors. Recent studies have linked an increase in childhood obesity, ADD symptoms and childhood depression to this phenomenon and shown that time in nature can actually relieve some of these symptoms. One step of re-connecting kids with nature is creating and preserving meaningful nature experiences for them close to home.

Our yards have become increasingly manicured and with tidy lawns, carefully pruned shrubs and limbed up trees all designed for the adult aesthetic. By looking through a child's eye, and make a few inviting changes, yards that were once ‘off limits’ can become an inviting place for children to explore nature-- and it doesn't have to be difficult. Instead of buying that box-store swing set a child quickly outgrows use these guidelines to create a more lasting play environment:

- Let go of a perfectly tidy landscape, especially a highly manicured lawn and the chemicals it takes to make it look that way.
- Plant a diversity of shrubs, perennials and trees that will encourage wildlife including pollinators such as birds and insects.
- Stay away from poisonous plants with young children such as yew and monkshood.
- Allow ‘rough-edges’ that are not manicured. Areas planted as a mini-prairie, wildflowers or un-mowed areas of lawn work well.
- Give children spots of their own to dig, plant, build and play.
- Instead of pre-built play houses or swing sets, give children materials to build their own. For young children create the structure's outline and let them create their own walls out of blankets or sticks; let older children build the whole thing. Forts needn't be in trees to still be magical places for kids.
- Learn to garden together. Gardening can teach skills such as patience and stewardship and build self esteem. A garden doesn't need to be big to be effective. If your neighbor has children, perhaps share a plot of ground together to also encourage team work and sharing.
- Most kids can identify exotic plants such as a Giant Sequoia or palm tree, but not the plants found in their own state such as little bluestem or oak trees. Use native plants wherever possible. These plants make better habitat for wildlife and require little maintenance.
- Add loose parts. These include sticks, branches, seeds, rocks and other objects that are movable and can be used in imaginative play.
- Use sensory plants. Children love plants that have interesting scents, textures, colors and smells.

SOURCE: Christina Hoyt, Nebraska Statewide Arboretum, <http://arboretum.unl.edu>