

Creating a child-friendly garden

by Angela Michaelis

The outstanding feature of outdoor settings is constant change. As the weather changes so too does the experience – the sound of the wind, the sun's warmth, the play of light.

Children benefit from opportunities to explore this changing, natural environment and to learn its time frames, which differ from artificial routines. Growing things take weeks, seasonal changes happen over months, and observations can last for minutes, hours or even days.

Good garden design enriches the outdoor environment, providing children and child care professionals with a fresh range of play materials each day.

How will planning your garden benefit children?

In a rich garden children can experience physical, intellectual, social and spiritual challenge. They practice gross motor skills as they climb and run and fine motor skills as they pick and collect fruits, flowers and leaves. With the support of child care professionals, they take time to observe and to discriminate. They cooperate in pulling weeds, creating a cubby or arranging rocks. They are encouraged to be creative, to pretend and to relax. They can experience wonder and learn about the seasons, and the cycle of life and death.



This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles: 2.1, 3.1, 3.4 – 3.7 and 4.1

OSHCQA Principles: 5.1 – 5.4 and 7.2

QIAS Principles: 4.1 – 4.6 and 5.3

Beginning your planning

Enhancing your garden as a child-friendly resource can begin with observation. Over a period of time, for example a month, take as many of your activities outside as possible. Observe how children's play differs in a different setting. Do stories take longer to tell, do children build in different ways or do they find different materials for craft or subjects for their art? Note what obstacles you experience using the outdoors. For example, a lack of shade, unsuitable sized spaces or the need to take many materials with you. Reflect and discuss with colleagues and children what you could add to the environment.

Consider your site and its strengths. A sketch plan, roughly to scale, will be a great help. Encourage children to help in age appropriate ways. They may observe which areas are shady or sunny, or use a compass to find north and to track the sun's path. They may use footsteps or a tape measure to record distance. They will also show you by their play which existing features they value.

What to include on your plan

Include all outdoor areas on your plan, even those used for utility areas such as storage areas or entrances, even car parks. You may want to change existing uses when you have considered your site as a whole.

Consider what you would like to show and what to screen. Let children describe what they see from their point of view, while you consider what areas can be easily supervised, perhaps from a higher balcony or another part of the garden.

Note on your plan water sources and current traffic routes to entrances and exits and favourite play areas. These activities probably include digging, moving objects and water play and you will want to retain opportunities for each of these. But much more is possible.

Issue 31 September 2009 (Pages 21 – 23)

Starbuck, Olthof and Midden (2002) describe a 'topic web' they used to record their key ideas of what children could learn from the garden. They then used this as a checklist to see how successfully they were delivering experiences, from feeding birds to making compost.

Adding new features

As you observe how children move in and through the garden, ideas to broaden those experiences will arise. Examples of ways that outdoor experiences may be extended include:

- Catering for children's gross motor skills by building a slide into a mound or erecting a low swing with a soft seat
- Planting shrubs to define spaces such as areas for group activities, or a winding pathway to slow traffic
- Using grassy tussocks and upright shrubs to supply private spots
- Providing a range of natural materials for children to include in their outdoor play. For example, complement river pebbles of a suitable size with other natural materials such as driftwood, rocks and shells and natural low seating for social activities (Christie and Christie, 2004).
- Using large pots as an alternative to a permanent garden bed and giving children their own garden spaces. Pots need watering every day in summer, so cluster them together to make this easier.
- Providing small tools so that children can easily assist in garden tasks. Small watering cans are safe and easy for children to carry.

A garden project can teach children about science, perseverance, nutrition and more. But be realistic in your expectation of children's commitments – their enthusiasm for mulching, weeding and watering may be short-lived. Start small with the vegetable garden: perhaps a pot of strawberries, a tripod on which to grow fresh beans or a single pumpkin or passionfruit plant which will produce lots of fruit over time.

Children can also grow a colourful garden from a single seed packet of nasturtiums, pansies or daisies. Sunflowers will amaze children with their growth speed and size.

Maximising space

Providing a shady canopy, a sense of scale and more, a tree can be a part of every garden. A small yard can have a tall tree with a slender trunk, such as a lemon scented gum. A deciduous



tree controls the sun perfectly when it sheds its leaves in winter. A flowering gum grown in a pot gives colour and a wildlife lesson by attracting birds and insects.

To maximise space, consider unused areas. Perhaps outside the main fence or at an entrance, you can plant a tree or create a special garden where older children can work without younger ones disturbing their projects.

An awkward corner beside a shed may suit a 'secret garden', ideal for pretend play. A single entry/exit point prevents it being used as a thoroughfare. A low fence or hedge gives a sense of privacy at children's height but is still able to be overseen by a taller adult (Christie and Christie, 2004).

In even the smallest outdoor area, there will be walls or fences from which pots or baskets can be hung. A single lettuce growing in a wall basket is an introduction to edible gardening; a climber cools and softens a hot wall; a hanging plant can be touched without being pulled out. A large pot can contain a mini-garden with a shrub, some annual flowers and a ground cover, or simply be sown with grass seed to give a seat or a play space (Young and Elliott, 2003).

Remember that plants dry out easily in these conditions. Being mindful of trip hazards, a hose may be safely attached to a fence to move water from the tap to the plants.

Keeping safe

The changing nature of the garden has particular safety challenges, each with their own solution. A leafy tree with a broad canopy, for instance, provides good sun protection, but one with

Issue 31 September 2009 (Pages 21 – 23)

berries that are poisonous or a choking hazard must be avoided. Consult a reputable website, your local council or botanic garden for lists of toxic or dangerous plants for children.

Most wildlife attracted to your garden – birds, butterflies, ants, spiders, possums, earthworms, beetles – is harmless and interesting for children. But outdoor spaces, like those indoors, need to be properly maintained. For example, pots should be checked regularly for poisonous spiders hiding under the rims, and a nest of biting ants should be removed.

Other risks need to be assessed and if necessary addressed. While many nectar rich flowers will attract bees, most children never receive a sting. A bee on a flower is a chance to observe and to teach respect for living things as well as safety. However, if a child in your care is likely to have a life threatening reaction to a bee sting, it is best to choose plants that are pollinated by insects other than bees. Older children can help you research them.

You will want to avoid irritant or toxic leaves in your garden, but there are many others to choose from. Herbs make good ground covers in pots or garden beds. Their aromatic foliage appeals to the sense of smell of all children, from grasping babies to school age cooks. Seek out other plants with sensory interest. For example, plants with soft leaves to touch, scented flowers or smooth or textured bark.

Finding help

Creating your child-friendly garden is a great opportunity to extend your relationship with the community. Ask families to be part of your

planning and to assist in landscaping projects. Seek advice from your local garden centre when you buy seeds or soil there. Invite members of a local garden club to visit or to pass on some easy-to-grow plants. Botanic gardens can also provide inspiration, ideas and sometimes educational programs for children.

What can gardens offer children of different ages?

Well planned gardens have something to offer each age group. For babies, the constant changes in light, sounds and scents are very different to those they will experience indoors. A child care professional has the opportunity to extend babies' language by talking about these sensations as they present themselves.

Toddlers exploring the outdoors with hands and bodies are gathering new sensory experiences as they reach for tree trunks for support, grab onto shrubs and smell/taste safe non-toxic leaves, flowers and fruit. Preschoolers will discover insects and birds and engage in endless pretend play. By school age, children can play a significant role in planning, developing and maintaining garden areas.

Conclusion

Regardless of your location or the size of your outdoor space, careful and innovative planning can help you to develop a garden that will enhance children's experiences and learning ■

References and further reading

- Children's Hospital at Westmead Poisons Information Centre (2007). *Poisonous plants*. Retrieved 13 July, 2009, from http://www.chw.edu.au/parents/factsheets/poisonous_plants.htm
- Christie, T., & Christie, R. (2004). *Childspaces: A design sourcebook for early childhood environments*. Wellington: Childspace Early Childhood Institute.
- Horticultural Therapy Association of Victoria. (n.d.). *Gardening for children*. Retrieved 6 July, 2009, from <http://www.horticulturaltherapy.com.au/download/pdf/OnlineRes/Gardening%20for%20children1.pdf>
- Kidsafe SA. (2004). *Fact Sheet: Backyard safety*. Retrieved 13 July, 2009, from <http://www.gtp.com.au/kidsafesa/inewsfiles/inews.25958.1.pdf>
- Kidsafe Western Australia. (2005). *Fact Sheet: Poisonous plants*. Retrieved 13 July, 2009, from http://www.kidsafent.com.au/pdf/NEW_Poisonous_Plants_2005.pdf
- Raising Children Network. (2006). *Dangerous plants*. Retrieved 13 July, 2009, from: http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/dangerous_plants_checklist.html/context/576
- Starbuck, S., Olthof, M., & Midden, K. (2002). *Hollyhocks and honeybees: Garden projects for young children*. St. Paul: Redleaf Press.
- Young, T., & Elliott, S. (2003). *Just discover! Connecting young children with the natural world*. Melbourne: Tertiary Press.