

play areas

TIME TO PLAY

A well-designed play area will bring the kids hours of fun and the adults peace of mind

Story: Natalie Raad



Designing a kid-friendly garden is easy. With so much to choose from when it comes to children's play equipment — from cubbyhouses, swings and slides to sandpits, monkey bars and rock-climbing walls — creating the right play area for your outdoor space is simple.

In this day and age, encouraging outdoor play is the preferred option for kids, as opposed to the indoor, high-tech alternatives. Getting the kids outside and playing is easy if you've designed a suitable play area.

As with any landscape design project, planning is the key to success. Taking the time to design an outdoor space that is both suitable for adults and kids will ensure your backyard is enjoyed by everyone.

"Ideally, play areas should be designed to blend with the backyard area rather than be the first thing that is seen," says Aaron Worth of Utopia Landscape Design.

"Plantings and structural elements such as screens or features that are sympathetic with the surrounding landscape will help the play area become part of the backyard environment."

To make the play area less obvious, Aaron recommends positioning it to one side of the backyard or in a slightly less visible space.

The location and visibility of the play area will be determined by the age of the children who will use it. "Parents need to see young children, so only partial screening of the play area is possible, whereas older children can

play without supervision, so the play area can be totally screened if need be," says Aaron.

"It is also important to look at the traffic flow around any structure you intend to build or install and make sure it fits in with your landscape design," says Calvin Alderton of Timberplay. "There's no point in having plants nearby if they're going to get trampled by children getting off a slide."

According to Melanie Barclay of Awesome Playground Equipment, given that residential yards come in all shapes and sizes, one swing or play set configuration is not going to work in every backyard. "Playground manufacturers need to be able to offer flexible designs that can be adjusted to safely accommodate hard-to-fit and unlevel yards," she says.

Playground equipment manufacturing has evolved, says Melanie. "These days, you can find equipment manufactured from a variety of materials to suit all environmental conditions, such as powder-coated galvanised steel, plastics and treated timber and environmentally friendly, chemical-free softwoods like cedar and redwood."

When it comes to play areas, the size of your backyard need not be an issue. You don't need to have an abundance of space to ensure the kids have a fun, safe space to play in. With some clever thinking and planning, any garden — whether it's a big backyard or a small courtyard — can have a play space included.

The size of the yard will, however, determine the size of the play apparatus that can be

used, says Aaron. "A small yard might only have space for a single swing or small cubby house, while a large yard can accommodate a sprawling maze of play items."

In small gardens, the key is to make some parts multifunctional; that way, when the kids aren't playing, the space can be used by adults. For example, you can integrate a timber



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daybed in a sandpit and have a removable lid on rollers embedded in the deck. This will maximise the space you have.

Creating multi-purpose areas will maximise the play potential of any backyard, says Aaron. "Driveways (suitably fenced) and rear tiled areas can be used for bikes, skateboards and games of handball, while portable items such as trampolines and basketball/netball hoops can be used and then moved to one side or stored away."

In larger backyards where space is not an issue, a designated play area can be created where play equipment can be fixed and readily available for kids to engage with at any time.

Most modern play equipment is versatile and compact, meaning you can easily adapt and add to your play area to suit the needs of your children as they grow.

"When planning your backyard and kids' play area, it's important to plan ahead and make sure you get the maximum use of the

1. *This custom-designed cubby can easily be used as a shed when the kids get older and outgrow it. Garden design by Inspired By Nature.*

2. *In this kid-friendly yard there is a trampoline set on a bed of soft fall material and a synthetic grass putting green set into the lawn.*

KIDS AND GARDENING

While you've got the kids outside, why not try to engender an early interest in gardening? As with any learning experience, making it fun is a great starting point and with the Kids Garden multi-set from Annabel Trends, that should be easy. Each multi-set includes a carry bag,

apron, kneeling pad and three garden tools. Matching garden gloves are available as an optional extra, as is a patterned umbrella. For more information: www.annabeltrends.com.au.



area over time as the kids are growing up," says Calvin. Most people start with a basic structure, such as a simple cubby or fort, and add to it as the kids get older and are able to handle more climbing and more adventurous play.

"When purchasing a play system, you can ensure longevity by selecting a modular and expandable design for a grow-into rather than a grow-out-of design," adds Melanie.

Calvin agrees: "When selecting play equipment, make sure the structure can be added to over time so you get maximum use out of it."

Play areas should be designed with a contingency use once the area is no longer needed as a play space, says Aaron. "This may involve simply extending garden or lawn areas to reclaim the space, or a specific alternative use, such as an area for a spa."

Things like sandpits can later be converted into garden beds once the kids have grown up, or a custom-built cubby can be used as a garden shed. The more elaborate the play area, though, the more extensive the transformation will be, warns Aaron.

Safety in the garden is a priority, so it's important to keep views of play areas →

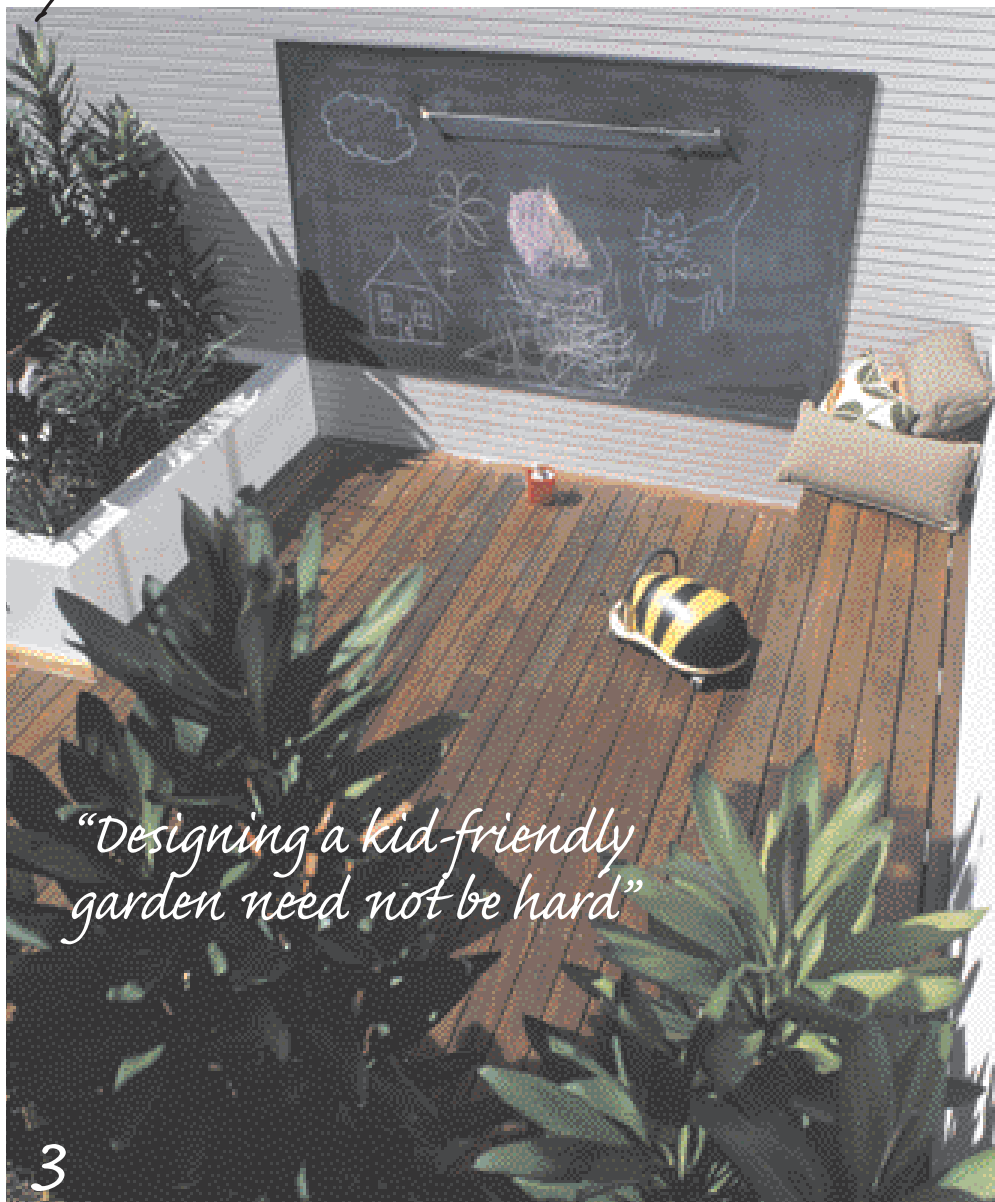


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"Designing a kid-friendly garden need not be hard"

unrestricted, especially if it will be used by small children. Keep all wooden play equipment sanded and well-oiled to avoid splinters. Avoid using treated pine and make sure nails are hammered in on any timber structures or decking. Ensure all structures in the garden — whether they're designed for play or not — are robust and won't deteriorate quickly due to the weather.

Safety surfaces are also essential for play areas, with the choice of material dependent on the type and height of the playground apparatus.

"With higher structures (over 500mm) it's recommended that some sort of soft fall material is used," says Calvin. There are three main types: sand, bark and rubber. "In most cases, bark is the most popular in residential play areas as it is cheaper and blends into the backyard more naturally."

"Playground equipment should never be placed on hard surfaces such as concrete or asphalt," adds Melanie. Grass may not always be the optimum safety surface as it may quickly turn to hard earth in areas of high traffic. "Shredded bark and soft play mulch are considered acceptable shock-absorbing surfaces when installed and maintained at a

sufficient depth under and around playground equipment," she says.

"It is extremely important to have weekly and monthly checks on your play areas to ensure your children's safety," says Calvin. "After all, the point of having a play structure in the yard is that children can play safely at home."

As with any landscape project, the cost of a play area will be dependent on the size, complexity and quality of the materials used. "A play area can be as simple as a commonly available swing set positioned on a sandpit, which might cost around \$600. Or it could be a detailed labyrinth of swings, bridges and climbing towers that could cost many thousands of dollars," says Aaron.

Designing a kid-friendly garden need not be hard work. Nor need it be complicated. It can be as simple as incorporating a lawn area where kids can run around or installing age-appropriate play equipment (even if it's just a blackboard attached to a wall and a store-bought sandpit) in a designated play area.

If you plan it well and make sure the area is safe, a backyard play space will be enjoyed by both adults and kids, meaning it's playtime all the time. ■

READ ALL ABOUT IT!

Although a swing set or a trampoline is lots of fun, armed with *Small Fry Outdoors: Inspiration For Being Outdoors With Kids* (published by ABC Books, rrp \$24.95), you can show your children just how many opportunities there are for creative outdoor play. A collaborative effort between Susie Cameron, Katrina Crook and Caroline Webster, the book is a treasure trove of ideas. Some (like cloud watching) require nothing more than imagination, while others are more like fun craft activities (such as making a rain catcher), but all foster a love of nature.



3. A deck area with a blackboard and bench seating serves as a kids' play space in this city courtyard. Garden design by Secret Gardens of Sydney.

4. If you have a tall tree why not go the DIY route and fashion a swing from rope and recycled timber? Photo courtesy of Australian Country Collections.