



Just for kids

Creating a garden that will encourage family interaction and creative play is a breeze

Words: Jacki Brown

Nature, fresh air and relaxation are essential for all of us, and especially important for growing children. Being outdoors contributes to health and wellbeing and fosters an active lifestyle. The great Aussie backyard is a safe and convenient play space where kids can be easily supervised.

Family landscapes can also be spaces for adults and extended family to enjoy. Interaction between children and parents is encouraged with shared activity spaces and separate “garden rooms” or hideaways for play and passive recreation.

While it may not be practical or affordable to create your dream landscape, the reality may be a simple family garden made up of a few selected features. So what are some of the features you can include in a family garden to enrich the experience for adults and children alike?

Outdoor fun and learning

Playing outside is the subject of many a childhood memory: climbing, running, balancing, jumping and learning about nature, science and maths. The more variety in a child’s surroundings the more creativity and original thinking it inspires. Being outdoors provides even more possibilities to think outside the box and it’s a great way to spend family time away from everyday stress.

Younger children will benefit from an environment full of colour, texture, scent and sound to delight their senses. Older kids need more stimulation, interest and entertainment,

which will compete with computer games, such as a cubby or tree house, swimming pool, sporting equipment and climbing trees. Good climbing trees include jacaranda, crepe myrtle, elms, willow myrtle and brush box.

Pets and an open lawn area can both be enjoyed at any age by the whole family. Lawns are the canvas on which many family activities can be painted. You might also like to go a step further and create an outdoor wonderland for your family with features such as a flying fox, trampoline, cubby house, bridge, sandpit, fireman’s pole or, for the extremely ambitious, a hedge maze.

Encouraging family interaction

Families can interact outdoors by playing games, planting seeds or seedlings, picking flowers, harvesting fruit and vegetables and playing sports. Sports such as totem tennis, badminton and ball games allow kids to interact with friends and family.

Other features for family interaction are seating and alfresco dining areas, and exercise opportunities that can be used by the grown-ups as well as the kids; for example, a balancing beam.

Integrate and arrange the landscape elements so that it is practical for parents to supervise kids at play while cooking, gardening, relaxing or doing chores. Also create storage space for toys, bikes and pool toys where they can be kept securely out of the way and where they can be easily accessed for cleaning and checking for spiders.

And don’t forget that shade trees and shelters provide space for relaxing while watching kids as well as protecting children from the sun’s rays while playing.

Things you should avoid

Avoid attracting mosquitoes by ensuring gardens are well-drained and there aren’t open containers that collect water and allow mozzies to breed. Avoiding bees can be a trade-off between having plants with masses of flowers, which in turn bring hordes of bees, and having fewer or less showy flowers. Allergies in the garden are often caused by grass seeds — overgrown weed grasses in garden beds would be a prime suspect.

Pebble pathways can be a parent’s worst nightmare. They can be a safety hazard, causing slips or choking, but also cause mess when the pebbles are picked up and carried or thrown around. If pebbles get scattered on the lawn,

- 1.** Place cubby houses and other play equipment in a cool, shady spot where supervision is possible. Design by Pepo.
- 2.** A swing is a great way for older children to have fun and exercise with friends or with the family.
- 3.** A sandpit can offer many hours of fun for youngsters. Why not build one yourself? Garden design by Green Rooms.



they can be a big problem next time you mow the lawn, getting picked up by the mower blades and flung around the yard or even into windows.

When choosing plants, avoid spiky or poisonous plants, or keep them out of reach — for example, at the back of garden beds or above high retaining walls. Plants such as yucca, oleander, white cedar, coral tree and grevilleas are all known to have hazardous attributes. Not only can some plants cause irritation or an allergic reaction, some can cause injury. For example, spiky plants near

eye level along a walkway can end in tears, so consider a child’s eye level when planting thorny or spiky plants.

Enjoying plants and nature

Designing your family garden doesn’t have to mean installing a full playground in the backyard. Creative thinking, natural elements and reusing unwanted items can create fun and attractive play opportunities.

Give kids exciting options outdoors and engage in activities with them, share some

exercise and get fresh air. Give the family plenty of reasons to go outside; for example, playing games, collecting craft items from different plants, planting and picking vegetables and flowers, and painting pictures. ■

This article was prepared by Jacki Brown and the team at ecodesign on behalf of the Australian Institute of Landscape Designers & Managers (AILDM). If you would like to find an AILDM member in your area, visit the website: www.aildm.com.au.



Award Winning Landscape Design Consultants
‘2010 AILDM Award for Landscape Management’
‘2008 AILDM Award for Residential Landscape Design under \$25,000’

landscape design pool + deck design tree reports project management council plans horticultural advice

Visit our website or call us directly on 02 9871 7701
www.ecodesign.com.au

ecodesign
outdoor living environments