



Seasons of Play

NATURAL ENVIRONMENTS OF WONDER

RUSTY KEELER

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Part 2

Construction Projects and Resources

Construction Projects

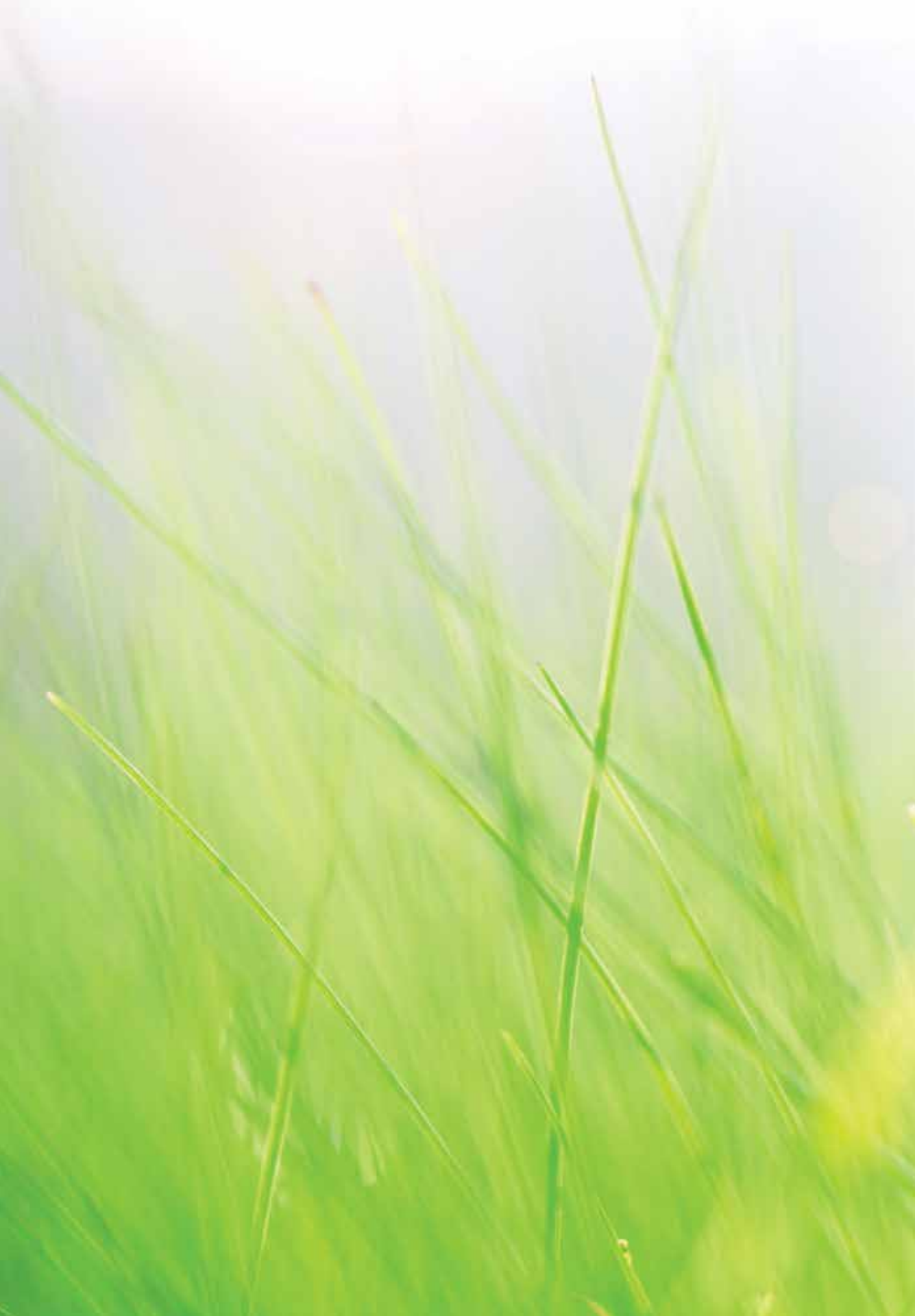
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Preface

Every child deserves . . .

- Every child deserves a safe place to play.
- Every child deserves supportive adults watching him grow.
- Every child deserves an environment that offers her endless possibilities.

Your children can have that. Your outdoor space can support that. You can be a part of it.

The environments in this book are not overly complex, expensive, or hard to build. The spaces were built by hand by teachers, friends, and families. One was built all at once. One evolved over time. All of them continue to grow and change and always will. Just like children.

The environments in this book are successful for the preschoolers and families they serve. What works in one center might not work in another school. Each child's needs are unique. Everyone's situation is different. Some outdoor areas are shady, and some are sunny—that affects what plants you can grow. Some are used by lots of children at once, and others may be used by small groups of children. Some yards need to handle wild, rambunctious, high-energy children, and some schools have mellow explorers and gardeners. What are your children like? What do they need? How can you create opportunities to explore and challenge and grow?

Another name for this book could be *A Year in the Life of the Natural Playscape*. It is a window to the natural-play environment and a glimpse at what happens there, what children do, what adults say “yes” to, and what natural spaces for children can look and function like—in all seasons, all year long. I hope what you'll see will inspire you to think about your own outdoor spaces in new ways. I hope you get ideas for changes you can make to your yards—plants you could add, paths you could build, gardens you could grow. Little by little, step by step. Big changes can happen with small additions over time.

I also hope you get ideas for changes you can make in yourself and how you use your outdoor space and what you allow children to do. The creation of a natural play space is part of it; the other part is you. What do you allow your children to do outside? When do you let them go out? For how long? In what kinds of weather? With what kinds of freedoms and with what kinds of loose parts to use? Some of the scenes in this book may surprise you. Children digging—everywhere. Children making a mess. Children outside in winter. Children playing with water outside in winter!

As you look, I hope you reflect on your own sense of self in your yard with your children. What do you say “yes” to? What do you say “no” to? Are there new activities you can let the children try? Are there new ways for you to be in the yard that allow children new freedoms and opportunities to explore, challenge, and grow, and more fully inhabit the natural yard you create?

Can you help them feel free to be?

Introduction

Hello!

This book is a window to the world of natural outdoor environments for young children.

A few summers ago, I started a project that is now the book you are holding. I teamed up with some of my favorite local home-based preschools to document the amazing things that happen in their backyards in different seasons. Outdoor play and learning is an important part of each center's educational philosophy, and they each have a very cool—and very different—natural playscape backyard.

- One space is a garden playscape oasis in the city with fruit trees, a sand pit, vegetable garden, grassy areas, and a hill.
- One space is a wild, rough-and-tumble jumble of plants, logs, sand, and dirt.
- One space is a minifarm with chickens, goats, cats, and a pony on a large, sloped yard with loose parts and hand-built play pieces.

Each space is amazing, with beautiful opportunities for children to be children and with freedom and support for play. I love seeing children inhabit a natural space, make it their own, and live fully in the present moment with their world. In my world, these yards have all the good stuff—leaves, apples, sand, flowers, kale, grass, rocks, mud, and more.

I am honored to have been witness to so many beautiful moments in these yards.

I am delighted to share them with you.

I hope you get lots of ideas for your own yard!

Part 1

The Children and the Yards





The Seed Center

Jacquelyn Beuchel, director

Eight children, three to six years old

The outdoor space at the Seed Center is one of the sweetest back yards on the planet. Built with love and care by Jacquelyn and her husband, Aaron, this space has a multitude of sweet little features thoughtfully created and placed within a small lot in the city. When Aaron and Jacquelyn moved in, the yard was flat, open, and totally exposed to the adjacent parking lot and buildings. They installed an attractive wooden fence for instant privacy and began playscaping the yard and preparing it for children's play and exploration. In went gardens, paths, shrubs, sand pits, raised planters, a hill and hill slide, stone, grass, wood chips, and much more. It is truly a natural oasis in the city.



Summer

Late summer. Green grass,
green leaves on trees.

Harvest time in the garden:
tomatoes, basil, squash, kale.

Harvest time in the miniorchard: apples!



Playscape Plants

People often wonder what kinds of plants are best for children's playscapes. I love what they did here: vegetable plants as playscape plants! What a neat idea. Pathways cutting through kale forests! A Brussels sprout jungle! So cool, and makes so much sense. We know vegetables are safe to eat. Go ahead and nibble, kids. Edible playscape!

Garden

Loading your playscape with multisensory plants is a great way to safely add tasting to your yard. But this doesn't mean you have to be timid in your plant selections. This garden has cherry tomatoes, cucumbers, and lettuce, but it also has abundant nasturtiums! Have you ever eaten those? Spicy! But it's good to mix things up. Let kids experience it all for themselves. Children might not like the spicy plants—ouch!—but they might. Maybe they will develop a taste for spicy stuff. Or maybe they'll just use the brightly colored flowers for potions. Plants as play props. Plant material as loose parts. Without telling anyone, Jacquelyn snuck stevia, which could be the sweetest plant alive, into the garden. Only the nibblers will discover it. But when they do, look out! Those sweet leaves will get gobbled up quicker than you can say, "Shoo Peter Rabbit, shoo!"



Tepee Corner

The elements in this yard were fun not just for children but for the adults who built them, too. This sweet tepee spot is filled with more great playscape plants, such as Jerusalem artichokes (tall, fast-growing, prolific, hardy, edible tubers), kale (nice texture, edible cooked and raw), butterfly bush (a wildlife attractor), a small rose bush (fragrant flowers), and forsythia (early marker of spring with bright yellow flowers).









Hard Surface

A paved area is perfect for bikes, trikes, wagons, and balls.



Messy Area

It's always great to have spaces—big or small—where children can create, construct, sort, stack, and make a mess. This “anarchy zone” corner is filled with natural loose play elements such as pine cones, rocks, leaves, pine needles, and pebbles. Endless possibilities for fairy huts, house building, dramatic play, and more.





Apples! Apples! Apples!

Once again: edible playscape. At this time of year, the apples are ripe and ready for picking and chomping. Every activity seems to be accompanied by the sweet flavor of apples. Crunch!





Hillside Slide

A hill slide is a great way to get down a hill quickly—or to launch a rolling apple.



Another Apple, Please

What flavor am I in the mood for? A Red Delicious? A big Granny Smith? I think I'll try them all and then decide. Thank you, Jacquelyn!







Sand Play

Big work happening in the sand pit. Big boulders hold the sand in place. Shovels, trucks, and construction toys help children dig into their world. Brrrrrum, brrrrrum!





Apple Tree Climb

Up, up, up you go! Test your strength. Follow your instincts. Listen to the tree. Trust your intuition.

Should children climb trees? Of course! Can adults find ways to feel comfortable allowing them to climb? Yes. Clip pokey branches; talk to children about climbing safety and not going too high; and spread soft wood chips beneath the tree.



Hills

Roll down a hill. Over and over again.





LITTLE LEAF



LittleLeaf Yard Plan



Ideas for Nature Play from Priscilla Reyer, Director of LittleLeaf Homestead School

One can never consent to creep when one feels an impulse to soar.

—Helen Keller, *The Story of My Life*

Free-Range Kids

Our outdoors space was designed with open and free-range exploration and play in mind. I wanted the children to feel free to roam, build, discover, hide, and creatively figure out their world. We have loose parts to build and create: tree stumps, garden carts, logs, buckets, hose access, ropes, sleds, sand, mud, and tools (rakes, hoes, shovels). There is a fire pit, a mud pit with a slide into it, trees to climb, hammocks to lie in and watch the clouds, swings to play on, hay bales to build with, a garden area, balance beams, and climbing structures.

Animals

Animals were always in the plan. We started with chickens. We used an incubator with fertile eggs donated from a couple of our students' homesteads. This was a beautiful connection between home and school life. The students created, planned, and built the chicken coop with the teachers. The chicks hatched during our school days. We cared for them in a brooder and eventually put them in the chicken coop. We used their eggs at snack time. We watched, year after year, as the hens hatched their own chicks. It was a miraculous circle that our children were able to witness, as most children attended for two to four years. Eventually, the children and teachers decided to have sheep at school. We discovered, measured, planned, and built a pasture for sheep. We cared for the animals every day: watering, feeding, petting, and taking on walks.

Safety

Safety is always a concern; when we teach and use communication skills effectively, the outdoors space is safe and engaging. The outdoors rules were that children had to be seen or heard by a teacher and be respectful. We practiced going into the woods, behind trees, and all throughout the yard looking, using hand signals, and shouting to be sure we were all within a safe distance. While tool use was monitored for safety, the children were always very mindful of their friends and surroundings. The yard was partially fenced due to a busy road and the neighbor's pond area. The rest of the play yard was open to the forest, meadows, and fields. Respectful behavior was all encompassing: feelings, nature, people, and animals.

Outside Activity

The children love being outdoors. Weather permitting—not freezing or raining too hard—we spend whole days out of doors. Naps, painting, crafts, lessons, and lunch in the sun, wind, or with the clouds. The children are disappointed when it's too cold to go outside!

As a director and teacher, I'm always doing reverent work while out of doors. I might be raking, sewing, knitting, fixing fences, organizing loose parts, digging, building, or caring for animals. I would always have children who were voluntary helpers and learners. Projects are also set up that children may take part in at any moment on their own while outside: felting, painting, woodwork, or seasonal crafts.

Sledding

For sledding, we station teachers at the top and bottom of the hill. On this day, the hill was slippery enough for children to go down without sleds with just a push from a teacher or a friend. For fun and safety, the children yelled out funny sayings like, "peanut butter antelopes!" and "pickle bunnies!" So we were all aware that a friend was ready to go down the hill and to be mindful. Look out below!

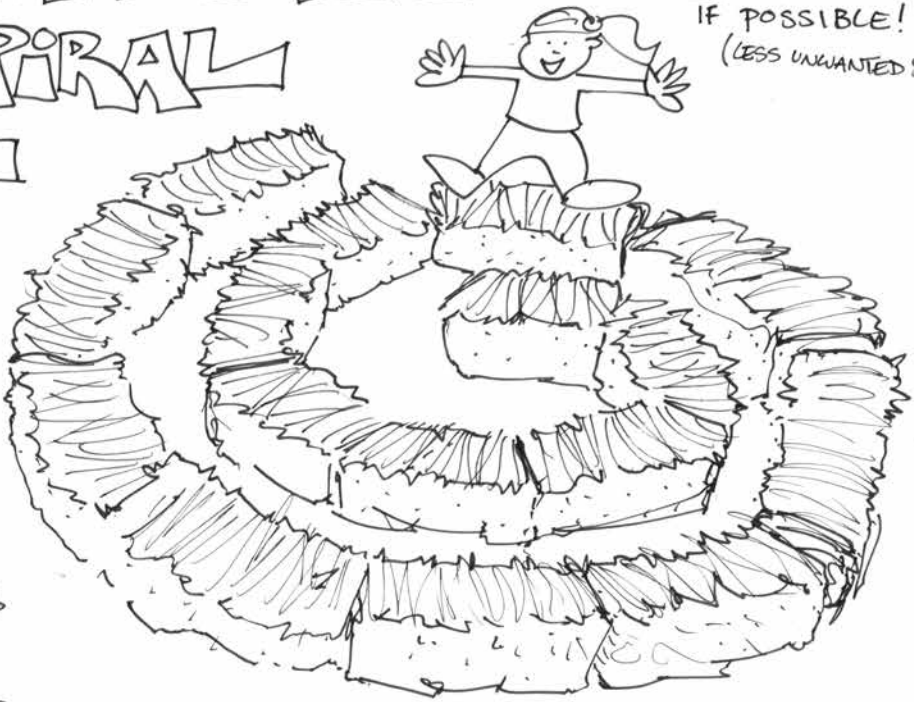
Construction Projects

STRAW BALE SPIRAL

* STRAW BALES *
NOT HAY BALES
IF POSSIBLE!
(LESS UNWANTED SEEDS)

FOR:

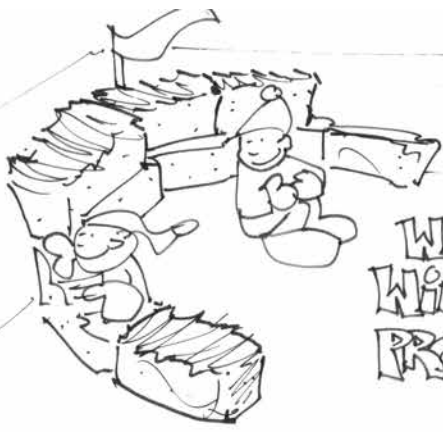
- BALANCING
- BUILDING
- GATHERINGS
- GAMES
- SEATING
- CEREMONIES



BUY FROM
LOCAL FARMS
OR GARDEN
SUPPLY STORES

USE 10, 15, 20, 30 BALES
↳ DEPENDS ON YOUR SPACE! ~

★ USE THE STRAW ON YOUR
GARDEN WHEN YOU
ARE DONE PLAYING ★



WINTER
WINDMILL
PROTECTOR



BENCHES



OBSTACLE
COURSE



RAISED
PLANTERS



LOOSE PARTS