

PAST ISSUES OF WILDFLOWER MAGAZINE

Wildflower is published quarterly by the Wildflower Center. Its content is national in scope with articles about the conservation and use of native plants as well as news from the Wildflower Center. A subscription is provided to Wildflower Center members as a benefit of membership.

The Family Garden - Summer 2013



ABOVE: Near the Texas Arboretum's Oak Motte, children take cover within forts created from tree limbs and branches for the 2013 Tree Talk Winter Walk. Photo by Patrice Schexnayder.

Story by Julie Bawden Davis

ON A WARM SPRING DAY in the early 1970s when I was 9 years old, I set out to explore the nearby pine grove in rural Massachusetts where I lived. With no cellphone tucked in my pocket, I left the world behind and entered the spongy needle floor. For the next several hours, I listened to Mother Nature, who whispered in my ear with a slight breeze and drew me to the sweet scent of blueberry bushes laden with ripe fruit and the cool running stream where I drank with cupped hands.

For mine and prior generations, such indelible childhood experiences were a given, but for many of today's children, outdoor experiences like this are unusual. With the preponderance of supervised play dates, organized sports and electronics that simulate

outdoor experiences in a "safer" sedentary indoor environment, many of today's children rarely if ever have the opportunity to learn directly from Mother Nature. This nature deficit disorder is of great concern to many, including environmental educators and even the medical community.

Garden Variety

Unlike many public gardens that incorporate traditional playgrounds into natural settings, the Luci Baines Johnson and Ian Turpin Family garden offers children a chance for unstructured play with no agenda.

"While there are a number of different destinations within the garden, there's little signage to tell children what they're looking at or explain what they're supposed to learn from the experience," says the garden's lead designer W. Gary Smith of the project, which is a Sustainable Sites Initiative pilot study participant.

"Rather than creating a stylized experience like a movie cut, the garden is the real deal," says Smith. "Kids are going to get dirty, because that's what you do when you play in nature."

That's not to say that children won't experience educational moments – they just won't see them as such. "There is a circle of limestone boulders and a barn pump where kids can fill up the pitchers and pour the water over the boulders," says Smith of a groundwater recharge simulation. "Keeping the experience unstructured stimulates imagination and motivates kids to return again and again."

A key element of the project is the spiral garden that showcases Texas native plants that feature spiral patterns. This garden contains a low, curving stone wall adorned with broken tile mosaics depicting plants such as the twisted blossoms of Turk's cap. Kids can walk on

"In a world where more and more time is spent by children looking at screens during the time their brain pathways are developing, one thing conspicuously missing is imagination," says Mary Brown, M.D., of Bend, Oregon, a past member of the board of directors for the American Academy of Pediatrics and the North Pacific Pediatric Society. She founded Central Oregon Pediatric Associates (COPA) 38 years ago. "The two-dimensional world facing children requires no imagination and in time can be as addicting as cocaine or tobacco," she says. "In addition, children are forgetting how to play, explore and interact with each other."

Those dedicated to the welfare of children are finding that the answer to this disconnect is nature. "Nature – 'Vitamin N' – has the ability to have a profound positive effect on both mental and physical health," says Brown. "The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) has a strategic plan addressing the most urgent threats to child well-being, and in recent years we added mental health, obesity and the influence of media to the list. Freedom to safely play and explore the outdoors can make a huge difference in solving many of these threats."

While the lack of physical exercise among children has its definite drawbacks, there are other equally devastating consequences of a lack of unstructured play. These include a loss of creative engagement and the

the wall alongside natives with spiraling characteristics, such as horsetail, buttonbrush and agaves.

The garden also features a metamorphosis maze of native shrubs such as cenizo, yaupon and barbados cherry tightly sheared into hedging, as well as a stumpy featuring stacked tree stumps.

An area of the garden smith is especially excited about will be home to larger-than-life bird nests that children can climb into.

"One child said that a nest was a giant spaceship, and that really made me happy," says Smith. "Creating a setting where kids can use their imagination is the reason why we're doing this."

The garden also allows us to expand formal, on-site education programs.

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Journalist and child advocate Richard Louv wrote the seminal book "Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder" in 2005, hitting a nerve that reverberated across the nation. "Nature deficit disorder is not a medical diagnosis," clarifies Louv, who is also chairman of the Children & Nature Network. "The condition provides a way to think about the price we pay for alienation from nature, while on the other side of the coin acknowledge the benefits of nature. Many studies have pointed to our interconnectedness with nature and have found that taking people out of nature is unnatural. Throughout human history, kids spent most of their developing hours working and playing in nature, while in three decades there's been a virtual disappearance of that exposure and resulting knowledge."

Louv picked up on the concern regarding the trend away from the outdoors as early as 35 years ago. "Environmental education groups have talked about the need to get kids outdoors for decades, so the pressure was already building when I wrote the book," he says. "The term nature-deficit disorder started out as a tongue-in-cheek phrase, but it soon became apparent that it finally put a name on the profound change in the relationship between children and nature. It was also the first time that the available evidence and potential solutions for the problem were presented in a way that could be digested by the general public."

"At this point, the nature gap is so wide that there is little argument about whether it exists. "This topic touches people in almost a primal way and crosses all boundaries – including politics and religion," says Louv. "Everyone agrees on the need for getting back to unstructured creative outdoor play, and programs are springing up across the country to address this."

The medical profession is also embracing the idea that watching an ant carry a crumb across the lawn or pretending a pinecone is a porcupine is good for kids.

"We encourage activity and call our prescriptions Rx2Thrive," says Brown. "As part of our well child exams, we give the parents a prescription that connects them to our parks and recreation department and even offers a 'play coach' if desired."

Of course, a daily romp in the forest isn't always possible for kids in the city or suburbs, but being surrounded by native plants is, says Louv, who replanted his landscape with natives during the writing of his latest book, "The Nature Principle," which looks at creating a society immersed in nature. "The book strives to open people's eyes to the plants around them and the animals they attract," he says. "Our natural history is just as important as our human history, because it's impossible to know who you are until you know where you are."

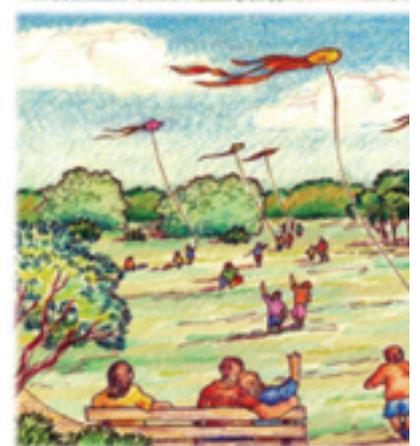
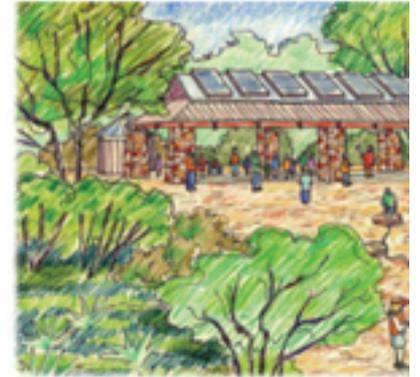
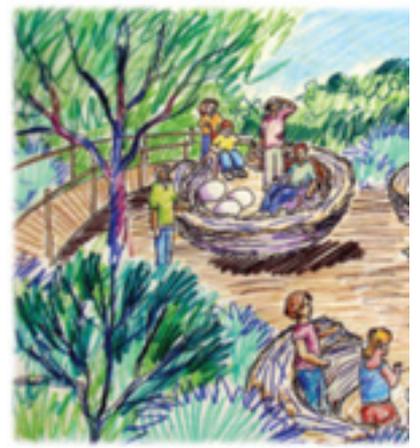
Julie Bawden Davis is a master gardener and author from Southern California.

spiritual value of being in nature, says W. Gary Smith, a landscape architect and artist who is the lead designer of the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center's antidote to the lack of Vitamin N: the Luci Baines Johnson and Ian Turpin Family Garden. Construction will begin in June for this nearly 5-acre garden, which promises to provide children and adults the opportunity to connect with the natural world in an environment that encourages unstructured play."

"Experiencing nature in an unstructured manner is an essential part of being a healthy person in a healthy world," says Smith, who has designed several awardwinning gardens, including Peirce's Woods at Longwood Gardens. "Such outdoor experiences allow children to make choices, and that enables them to develop critical attributes such as independence and self-motivation."

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ABOVE: Artist's renderings of the family garden in action. Sketches by W. Gary Smith.