

Planting for Play by Jeanne Vergeront

Under the boxwood, between the lilacs, and around the mounds of miscanthus grasses are the play spaces remembered from childhood, described in [environmental autobiographies](#), and inspirations for books like [Roxaboxen](#). Places planted for play can be found in the small corners of yards, along the fence, at the border of the schoolyard, under the bay window, at the edge of the porch, along the crick or drainage ditch. These might be places in gardens already well planted that wholeheartedly welcome children's explorations. They may be wild places overgrown with plants that we carefully edit for play. Or perhaps these are now empty places we plant for children's play and exploration across the seasons.

Towering trees, spreading branches, and a sweep of shrubs provide the highs, lows, edges, and insides defining space and creating a distinct sense of place for play. Children move low, slow, wide, side-to-side, and high as they crawl between, hide under, and climb up into trees and shrubs. Crouching, they explore leafy tunnels and how far they go. They duck into low enclosures created by sweeping branches where they hide, peek out, relish the feeling of being away from others; here *they* can see others and (think) others can't see them. In pairs and small groups, children act out favorite stories and weave together new ones; they play games, and form friendships inside leafy huts.



The same branches that droop and provide cover become the rungs of a ladder. Carefully balancing on branches, children discover look-outs with new views of familiar place; and it's a bit unpredictable. Then sitting astride low arching branches, they feel the branch's movements and work hard to achieve greater bounce. Straddling the boughs and crouching low, children might be racing ponies or riding out a storm.

Growing places change with the day, the weather, the season, and from year-to-year, always suggesting possibilities for children's play. Bare branches leaf-out into tiny yellow-spring-green slivers, creating the fort along the fence; when the leaves turn bronze or gold and drop, the fort disappears. The sun-shade mix shifts from morning to evening; the morning cool disappears and children take their play deeper into the thicket. New smells come in after a rain and suggest an adventure. Leaves continue to sprinkle water even after

the rain ends and inspire an expedition for finding rain-hat leaves. In piling leaves, peeling bark, and dragging sticks, children get nature under their fingernails as well as dirt.



Places planted for play are a virtual studio of natural materials to explore and create with. Where else are children able to explore the wide variety of textures offered by smooth, prickly, and fuzzy leaves? Watch hard, new berries ripen into squishy soft berries? Discover which pine cones are sticky and why? Cover rocks with wet leaves? Experiment with sticks that bend, snap, or float? Examine lichen and moss up close? Find out what it feels like to be buried in leaves?



Children use their discoveries to transform spaces, put their mark on them, and take ownership. In their place-making, children sweep dirt floors with branches, make beds of leaves, arrange tree cookie furniture, and gather leafy decorations. They alter places they find with their own designs, gathering fallen branches, stacking logs, or propping sticks against one another to reconfigure space. Openings created among trees or shrubs become

rooms to live or hide in, and some times to *defend*. Children often allocate ownership of branches, shrubby hollows, or leafy rooms. Places may be named to affirm solidarity, show ownership of spaces, and refer to shared and favorite stories.



Children's play in planted areas is their dialogue with that place. Moving among plants, children experience the precise geography and climate of a particular spot, its deep or dappled shade, how water seeps and pools, the freshness deep into the dark growth, the dry carpet of pine needles. Under the magnolia, they find the cool of the thick and enduring shade; they excavate beneath the soft, constant carpeted surface of big leathery leaves. Even gnarly roots radiating from the trunk animate a place and suggest possibilities for play.

Children come first in places planted for play. They might snap a branch, or stomp down the grass; they might leave a blanket or a bowl (that should never have left the house in the first place) outside. This is not the time to scold, protest, remind them that you have reminded them before, or shake an angry finger at them. Maybe if we provide more places planted for play—places that are easy to get to, familiar and changing, and sense-filling—children will joyfully play there throughout their childhood and carry the memories, discoveries, and possibilities into their futures.