

"Federation Corner" column
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Promoting natural playgrounds

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Communities around the country are moving away from equipment playgrounds in favor of natural playgrounds. A natural playground is a miniature landscape where kids can climb, dig, crawl, build, play house and use all their senses. Instead of play equipment purpose-built for a single function, children interact with natural elements creatively, in ways only limited by their imaginations.

Natural playground styles vary considerably. Some look like a conventional park, except that the play "equipment" is created from natural materials such as logs and playhouses made from trained vines. Others create the illusion of a totally wild area. Most fall somewhere in between. Some even have water features, such as a small "stream" that can change course as kids manipulate rocks and sticks.

In addition to encouraging imaginative play, natural playgrounds invite youngsters to interact with nature. Too few of today's children have the opportunity to experience nature through independent and self directed play, and that lack has been dubbed "nature deficit disorder". The disassociation of children and nature has been linked to a wide range of behavioral and health issues, including childhood obesity, attention deficit disorder and depression.

Indeed, there is a growing body of research on the benefits of unstructured play and time spent in natural surroundings. For example, academic performance improves measurably after time spent in nature. As these benefits have become better recognized, pediatricians have actually begun to write "prescriptions" for nature play.

Natural playgrounds are also cost-effective. Because they take advantage of existing terrain and "found" materials, construction costs are low. In contrast, conventional playgrounds feature very expensive equipment that is often replaced after only a few years to comply with evolving safety standards.

Still, natural playgrounds do need to be designed. In addition to safety concerns, natural playgrounds need to be appropriately designed for the level of use. Thus, a high-use playground in a heavily-populated urban neighborhood would need a different design than a lightly-used playground on the grounds of a small daycare center. Having specially designated play areas also protects sensitive natural areas like wetlands from the impacts of too much foot traffic.

The State of Maryland has recognized the importance of natural play in its Partnership for Children in Nature initiative and in Governor O'Malley's Proclamation entitled the *Maryland Children's Outdoor Bill of Rights*. As part of the Partnership, the Department of Natural Resources has helped create a number of natural playgrounds.

In my Northwood Four Corners neighborhood, we were ahead of the natural playground curve without knowing it. Nine years ago, our community-generated conceptual plan for the Rachel Carson Meadow in North Four Corners Park called for a nature trail, story circle, and other interactive features made from natural and recycled materials.

Since the park's existing playground is a "tot lot, we also requested a playground suitable for older kids and a seating area with chess boards and other features for senior citizens. Finally, our plan included managing the exotic invasive vines in the park to improve safety and visibility. We hired Dr. Marc Imlay to

assess the property and devise a control program. His report indicated that simply by controlling the invasive vines, we could go from only twenty percent visibility through the tree canopy to eighty percent visibility.

This year the facility planning process for North Four Corners Park resumes. So far, the county Parks Department seems determined to spend \$5-6 million to remove our existing soccer field, cut down the meadow's rolling hills and fill the valley with more than twenty feet of fill dirt to create a new soccer field and a fifty car parking lot; this despite the fact that the same amount of money could renovate at least twelve existing ball fields, thereby increasing the actual number of playable fields.

Parks wants to build this field even though there are flat park parcels in the area where existing fields could be expanded or new fields built for a fraction of the money they plan to spend in North Four Corners Park. And for the final irony, there is another group (less than three miles away) that is trying to get a park with a playing field on the site of the old Maryland School of Art and Design on the western side of Georgia Avenue just south of Wheaton.

The group, called "Green Space on Georgia" includes residents from the communities of Plyers Mill Crossing, Plyers Mill Estates, Carroll Knolls, and McKenney Hills who have joined together to advocate for a park with active recreation since there are no such resources on that side of Georgia Avenue. They've been at it for several years, and are equally frustrated with the Parks Department.

But there is hope. Nine years ago, we struggled to communicate our vision of a local neighborhood park with a sustainability theme. We tried to explain that there is a middle ground between leaving the meadow the way it is and obliterating it. We felt sure there was a way to design a landscape that feels like a natural area. We were convinced that the park could be improved without losing its essential character. We also believed it was possible to create a space that encourages and nurtures what Rachel Carson called "The Sense of Wonder".

We believed that having such a space in an accessible, densely populated community like North Four Corners would benefit families with young kids, older kids and seniors alike. Today, we can point to the natural playground movement and say, "that's what we're talking about." Today, we can work with the Partnership for Children in Nature and the No Child Left Inside Coalition to pursue our vision. And on May 19 my neighborhood will host our annual Rachel Carson Meadow Festival at North Four Corners Park. This great event showcases how the landscape "rooms" in the meadow create a multi-functional space.

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to theelms518@earthlink.net