

Way to Grow in Orinda

Landscape Design with Family in Mind, "Go Outside and Play"

Steve & Cathy Lambert



This holiday, instead of buying the latest, greatest video games why not give your kids and yourself more reasons to go outside and play? We always enjoy designing a landscape that accommodates the entire family. Although your yard can make a great play space for children, a family garden should offer something for everyone, whatever their age.

Whether you're starting from scratch, re-landscaping or just looking to make a few kid-friendly changes, planning for the evolving needs of your family will allow your garden to easily grow and change with you. With good forethought, you can develop a long-term design where landscape features and plantings can be easily changed to suit your needs as your kids grow and their interests change and as time and money become more available to you.

Using our own yard as an example of a long-term, family oriented landscape plan, here's how our garden has evolved with our family. One of the first additions we made was a fenced deck off the master bedroom. This served as a safe outdoor play space when the kids were toddlers. Later it made a great place for a wading pool since there is no need to drain and remove it each time (like you'd have to do on a lawn) and because it allows for easy draining right through the deck – just pull the plug. This deck space is still enjoyed by our daughter and her friends who spend a lot of time in her playhouse and kitchen. We built this deck with dreams of a future secluded hot tub spot for mom and dad. It was framed so we could easily cut in a hole and drop in a hot tub – sometime soon we hope.

Next, since we live on a very busy street, we decided our children needed a place to push and pull outdoor toys and to ride their tricycles and toy cars. To accommodate this need, we installed what we now refer to as a Trike-Track. We positioned this curvy, circular path within view of the kitchen windows so we could

keep a watchful eye while still getting things done. For added interest, we used stamped, colored concrete and pressed in various leaves and some fossils of dinosaur bones (from a 3-D wooden puzzle) and dino tracks (made from a clay mold). The path was built to circle around an existing tree and planted mound.

When our kids were old enough for a play structure, we removed some of the plants from inside our Trike-Track and added a simple structure with two swings, a fort, a slide and monkey bars. We chose a small structure that fit the space allowing for a safe boarder between it and the hard surface of the path. Our future plan for this spot is to one day, hopefully in the not too distant future, transform it into a family entertainment space with a built in barbecue, bar seating, and fireplace. We keep asking, but our daughter is not quite ready to trade-in her swing set and slide just yet.

When our kids got a little older, we added a path down to the creek that runs through the far edge of our backyard. It's a great natural playground full of frogs, bugs and other fun things to discover.

The next kid-friendly addition, when they were old enough to be trusted in the front yard, was our pond and waterfall. Aside from being a great place for the kids to enjoy fish, turtles, birds and dragonflies, our water feature helps to mask some of the street noise. While most homeowners would install a pond (aka a kid magnet) in their backyards, our space limitations didn't allow us that option, but it's still a favorite spot for our kids and their friends to gather and feed the fish.

Another favorite family spot is our vegetable garden. This is a great place to spend time together outdoors since we all enjoy planting and picking fresh fruits and veggies. If you have the sun, the space and dig digging in the dirt, a veggie garden is a fun and educational way to enjoy your yard with your kids. If you're also into composting and recycling, a great kid garden amenity (and a cool Christmas gift) is a worm farm/composter. The kids will love adding family food scraps and waste paper to it and be amazed by how quickly the worms eat through everything.

The largest play space in our yard is our lawn and it gets plenty of play time. Although it's only about 800 square feet, every inch of it gets used for catch, football, slip and slid, and sprinkler play.

Our next plan to get the kids outside is to install a zip line across our creek. These are becoming very popular. If you have the right spot for it the sit-and-zip lines are much safer, especially for younger children, than the hand bar style zip lines. Also important is a large, level launching pad and a clear, flat landing spot.



This sand box is an integral part of the Lambert's kid-friendly backyard.

STEVE LAMBERT

That's about all we have the room for in our own yard. To follow are some other ideas and installation tips for more family fun spots you may want to consider for your yard.

When planning your yard, keep in mind that lawns are not a complete necessity. That said if you have the room leave as large a space as possible for ball play and tag. For a nice plush lawn, choose an all-purpose seed mix that will stand up to the wear and tear of kids. Our favorite is a 90 percent tall fescue and 10 percent bluegrass blend.

You'll definitely get your kids outside to play more often if you include a play or climbing structure in your yard. Be careful where you position these features. They should be well away from hardscape areas and not too near any walls, fences or large bushes. Ideally, any play equipment should be installed on a dedicated play surface such as play yard mulch or recycled rubber mulch. Pay attention to the recommended age range when choosing a play structure. We've found that most boys lose interest in play structures by the 3rd or 4th grade while girls may use them for a few more years. Because of the relatively short time your kids will be using their play structure, be sure to factor in a replacement plan for this space.

Large, mature tree branches are in abundance in Orinda and make great hangers for swings and hammocks. If you don't have a good swing tree, we've built garden arches that can double as a swing frame by using swings that hook on and off again when not in use.

Children are drawn to water. When we're asked by clients if they should keep or add a swimming pool, we remember the hours we spent living in pools growing up and usually respond, "Yes!" There are so many new safety features available these days including sonar alarms, removable fencing and nets which make having a pool much less worrisome than they used to be.

Many other forms of water can be added to a family yard from fish ponds to pondless waterfalls, even water faucets placed near play spaces create hours of fun when attached to water play toys. One of our clients, who purchased a bathtub that was too small for their house and couldn't return it, asked if we could come up with a use for the tub in their yard? We placed it near their sand box, covered the bottom with smooth stones and added a faucet.

Their kids love cleaning their trucks and tractors in it and just playing with the water.

Sand boxes don't have to be a plastic garden eye sore. We've built sand boxes into garden borders with rock or concrete edging and added large climbing boulders to give them a much more natural look. These can easily be converted into a planting bed when your kids outgrow them.

Outdoor sports equipment and toys will help get your kids out of the house too, but containing the clutter can be a challenge. Convenient toy storage can help. Timber bench seats with toy chests beneath and the underside of barbecues counters are great dual use storage spaces.

Some other sport play spaces we've installed include: sport courts, bocce ball courts, and putting greens. We've also noticed a growing trend towards urban farming and know several families who've added chickens and coops to their yards. Do your research first because keeping chickens involves knowledge and work but can also be fun and rewarding especially for those who love fresh eggs.

You may have thought designing a kid-friendly garden would limit you to bright colored plastic play equipment and climbing gyms. After reading this article, we hope you have a much different mental image of a modern family garden that is fashionable and kid-friendly while providing an environment that is stimulating to children and adults.

Please contact us with any questions on this article or suggestions for future "Way to Grow" articles at office@gardenlight-landscape.com.