

# Mud-Pie Kitchens, Sunflower Huts And Other Backyard Adventures

by **Kaimi Rose Lum**

A friend introduced me to the latest rage in outdoor toys: the mud-pie kitchen. I hesitate to describe it as a children's toy because it can rope an adult in pretty quickly, too. The one in my friend's back yard is made of cedar, with a counter and a pretend cooktop, shelves for storing bowls and pie molds, and round cubby-holes for jars that can hold pine cones, pebbles, seedpods, dead bugs and other collectibles from the woods and garden. It even has a planter box the kids can practice potting flowers or veggies in. Inspired, my daughters and I went home and built our own mud kitchen, using two tree stumps from the scrap heap behind the garage. A little higgledy-piggledy, and not as elaborate as my friend's, but oh the hours of play that have ensued from that simple construction. We are already planning an expansion.

Happily, we've discovered that the library has a collection of books to inform our project, including several recent titles on designing and building the "natural playscapes" that became de rigueur a few months into the COVID-19 pandemic. One is "Nature Play at Home," by Nancy Striniste, a guide to creating outdoor spaces for your children to enjoy — from mud kitchens and fairy kitchens to insect hotels, bird blinds and living willow tunnels made of willow whips. Color photographs on every page illustrate the different projects you can try, or just help get the imagination stirring — who knew there were so many ways you can use tree cookies in your landscaping? Striniste even provides instructions for making a charming path out of "pizza box pavers," stepping squares made from concrete molded in pizza boxes and decorated with prints from leaves pressed into the surface.

Walking in the woods, feeling the rain, smelling flowers, and watching and feeding the birds are "what all children need and deserve," writes Rusty Keeler in "Natural Playscapes: Creating Outdoor Play Environments for the Soul." With its emphasis on using the natural world to teach, and its passages on the nature preschools that are instilling an environmental ethic in children at a young age, his book feels geared toward the educator, but it's also packed with practical advice and plans that can help the layperson-parent develop an outdoor space that's fun and edifying. Keeler shows how using simple planting techniques, bringing in benches and birdhouses, adding art and building

soundscapes with wind-chimes and bells, can increase the play potential of your yard and garden. A workbook at the back includes instructions for five DIY projects, including a sunflower house and a "meadow maze."

If you're wanting to tackle something grander — say, a treehouse or playhouse — a series of books by David and Jeanie Stiles offers plenty of how-to's, as well as some car-

pentry basics, all spelled out in clear, simple instructions accompanied by photographs and drawings. What's nice about the Stiles' books is that they include a range of designs, from platform treehouses that can stand on their own to more involved constructions incorporating two trees or more. "Treehouses You Can Actually Build" is a great primer on the subject, "Treehouses and Playhouses You Can Build" takes it further with blueprints for a Hobbit house and a Victorian playhouse, and "Tree Houses and Other Cool Stuff" includes more treehouse designs as well as instructions for making a trolley line, treasure chest and two types of swing. The Stiles also include tips on ladder safety and accessorizing your treehouse with pulleys, fire poles, slides and crow's nests; in short, everything you need to make your kids' dream treehouse.

For guidance on other outdoor adventures at home, there's "Cool Backyard Camping" by Alex Kuskowski, with a chapter on "Campfire Basics," suggestions for making a "ghost story kit," and three recipes for s'mores. "Follow the Trail: A Young Person's Guide to the Great Outdoors" by Jessica Lay has tips on identifying animal tracks and plants, plus a section on tick safety. "I Love Dirt" by Jennifer Ward lists 52 nature activities to do with your kids.

And once you've got your mud-pie kitchen up and running, check out Marjorie Winslow's classic children's book "Mud Pies and Other Recipes." In it your children will learn how to make "Wood Chip Dip," "Crabgrass Gumbo," "Roast Rocks," "Dandelion Souffle" and other concoctions for their next lawn party.

When that's done, come to the library for some outdoor play. On Thursday, July 22, we'll be holding an all-day self-guided Story Walk based on Simon James' picture book "The Birdwatchers." A second Story Walk will be held on Thursday, Aug. 12.

And in June, come by and pick up a sunflower starter kit.

Happy summer from Snow Library.

*Kaimi Rose Lum is assistant library director at Snow Library.*

