

Sharing the Garden with our Children
Jude Hobbs 2005

Do you remember when you were young and had a secret place where you could escape the grown-up world? It might have been a natural spot that was perfect the way it was, like the middle of a corn field. Or maybe it was a place where a few plants needed just a bit of rearranging. And then there may have been the times where you chose to construct your ideal hideaway.

It is human instinct to find shelter and children tend to create habitats that are just their size. I have noticed that when children feel comfortable being in the garden* they'll explore and weave out their own hiding niches.

For instance, I'll be walking down our little lane and see out of the corner of my eye some bamboo poles, where I know I had not left them. I look a little further and see those poles are actually a doorway. I peek inside and there sits an old pallet with a bamboo mat on top, some rocks have been brought in for a raised planter, and on the makeshift table I may find some dishes left out from one of their infamous picnics. My daughter and her friends have been busy again.

The plants that surround this niche are bamboo, Portugese laurel, a large walnut with a 71" girth, and variegated holly. The floor space is about eight by eight, kids don't need much room overhead. Tying back branches that interfere with the openness works well.

As I find my way back on to the lane once again, I imagine the many children of all ages that live in miniature worlds like these, where they can lay back among the varied colors of green and watch the changing patterns of the sunlight through the leaves.

In our yard there are several other areas with naturally occurring plant growth that are potentially good hide-outs, and through the years Gabrielle has investigated them all. The age of a child will determine what type of place will evolve. For the very young a guiding hand is helpful.

Here are a few examples if you are starting a 'hide-out' from scratch:

1. A sunflower house: Clear an outline for the floor (can be 4X4 or larger) and along the perimeter prepare a 3" or 4" wide area for planting. Drop in several seeds: a sunflower with a morning glory seed or scarlet runner bean seed.

Cover the seeds with an inch of soil, press, and water gently. Water seeds every day (if not raining). When the seeds sprout watch carefully for insects and/or put a 'guard' around the seedling (a recycled cup with opened ends; tear off when plant outgrows it.) As the sunflower heads grow and droop, the vines will reach across to make a roof. You can tie hemp string just under the flower to form a more secure roof. This string will guide the vines to create a dense overhead cover.

2. Bean teepee: Clear a circle, use bamboo poles or straight branches (7') tie at one end with strong rope, spread the poles (the length of the poles will determine the size of the teepee). You'll have to do some experimenting for that one. Place red runner beans and train to cover poles. Remember that bees are attracted to flowers, so if your child is allergic to bees plant non-blooming vines, like holbellia, on the trellis.

3. Grape space for all ages: Clear an area 12'X12' or some variation there of. Plant grapes with a 5' spacing. As the grapes grow, weave the vines so as to create an enclosed shelter, leaving an opening for a door. Using 4X4 posts is recommended as you might want to consider also using the space to hang a hammock. Remember you need to plant two varieties for grape production. Here are some images people of all ages shared with me when I asked this question: What is/was your favorite hide-out?

- . In the cornfield, most anywhere- or breaking off several stalks to weave into a house and setting a few more for the roof.
- . Wiggle my way into the plants, where there is just a little space.
- . Up in the sycamore tree
- . An underground fort, digging deep enough to nestle in and placing boards on top and then covering with dirt and planting with vines. This could be done on a property edge or an abandoned field, behind a barn or garage. The person who told me about this one said this was a very secret fort and the true fun was not letting her parents know this was in the making. They called it their weasel hovel.
- . A vine maple dome covered with vines.
- . A hollowed out tree for having a tea party where everything would stay dry
- . Tree houses
- . Behind a waterfall
- . A picnic table covered with blankets
- . Forts in the city-back edge of an empty lot where there are a few trees, shrubs, and vines, using recycled everything.

A few reminders:

- . Your kids will often be sharing this space with wildlife. The shrubby edges may also be a hiding place for garter snakes or a place for birds to rest or nibble.
- . It is always nice to have a place to sit. An old log or pieces of wood on cement blocks- whatever you can find.
- . Be creative: A little camouflage goes a long way.
- . Plants that work as climbers; combining and layering adds density:

Annual climbers: Beans, cukes, peas.

If your niche is to be permanent you might add these perennials, (be sure to allow enough room along the edges): amaranthus, calendula, fennel borage, dill, artichoke lavender, daylillies.

Perennial Vines: Akebia, passion flower, Kiwi.

* (I define garden as everything in one's yard from veggies to rhodies)