

Dream Dwellings

Creating the ideal outdoor space can set the scene for a lifetime of memories

By Victor Jacobs



YOUR KIDS will love playing in their playhouse, which can be a wonderful blend of home-enhancing art and practical fun.

Let your imagination take you away this summer by building a playhouse that will transform your backyard into an adventure land for years to come.

There are many advantages to building a playhouse for your kids. Just ask **Barbara Butler**, who has been building play structures for children all over the world since 1987. A true child at heart, Barbara is the type to look at a tree and bus stop, and think, "It would be so cool if that bus stop was built in that tree."

With that kind of childlike imagination, Butler has transformed herself from a summertime construction worker into a world renown "play professional."

It all started some 24 years ago, when Butler was hired by Bobby McFerrin (of "Don't worry, Be Happy" fame) to restore his backyard, which included a play structure for his children. After extensive research, Butler designed a playhouse that included hand-carved totem poles, slides and tire swings.

After that, she was hooked. since her first endeavor, Butler has built play structures for celebrity clients such as Will and Jada Pinkett Smith, Kevin Kline, Robert Redford and Lou Adler. Her work can be seen as far as the South of France and South Korea. While these magnificent, custom-built originals cost thousands of dollars, you don't need to be super wealthy to bring your child's fantasies to life.

Here are some tips from Butler to help you build your own playhouse:

RESEARCH: You can find some great do-it-yourself books at Home Depot or Lowe's. Butler recommends books by Genie and David Stiles. Also, Sunset Design books are great learning tools, as they contain lots of pictures and basic diagrams.

LOCATION: You want your play structure to complement your garden, so it is a joy to look at. A sturdy tree can be used as a great foundation. A hill or slope can be great for a slide or a multi-level structure.

DESIGN: Butler says to start simple. Begin with an elevated foundation that's 6 or 7 feet high. Children want a hard way up and an easy way down. When considering the physical features, don't discount the basics: Swings, slides and ladders are always favorites. Rock walls, secret hatches, bridges and rope ladders will wear the kids out as they play games like cops and robbers and king of the fort.

SAFETY: Butler refers to the "use zone" as a 6-foot area that's been cleared out around the structure where kids can roughhouse without falling on anything hazardous. This area can be filled with bark chip, rubber matting or pea gravel. Next, all of Butler's custom designs are well-sanded to avoid splinters, and all exposed edges are curved. The structure should be sturdy enough for the whole family.

MATERIAL: Butler uses all-natural redwood for her projects. She says redwood is perfect, because it is durable and provides easy maintenance for years. Other options include cedar, cypress and the newer plastic lumber. Be careful with treated woods, since they often contain toxic substances.

FAMILY INPUT: Ask the kids what features they want to see. They will have some great ideas! It is the perfect chance for you or your spouse to revisit the school years spent in woodshop or art class. Butler's team of "play professionals" is made up of her family members. She is joined by her husband, Jeffrey, her two brothers, Robert and James, her sister, Suzanne and a handful of nieces, nephews and spouses. It's a true family business.

"A playhouse may be a nonessential item but it is a "hybrid buy,"" says Butler. Whether you are building your own playhouse or buying a Barbara Butler original, a well-built playhouse (especially a treehouse) can add to your home's property value; they are beautiful to look at and provide memories for generations. Learn more about Barbara Butler and her wonderful creations by visiting her website at barbarabutler.com. **OCF**