



small space made natural

by Rusty Keeler

I know what you are thinking: You love natural playscapes. You dream of providing your children with the opportunities to play and discover the world of nature. But you just don't have the space. You don't have the right conditions. You don't have sunlight or you don't get enough rain. Don't let that stop you! Centers all over the world are looking at their outdoor spaces — big and small — and deciding to take the plunge and begin to add natural elements to their yards. It doesn't take the perfect piece of land or picture-perfect conditions to be able to make beautiful changes to your outdoor



Rusty Keeler lives in the woods of upstate New York and designs natural playscapes for children. When Rusty is not designing playscapes he can be found making ice sculptures out of frozen water balloons.

Rusty's book, *Natural Playscapes*, is available from www.ChildcareExchange.com. Visit Rusty's web site: www.earthplay.net. Join Rusty's "Earthplay Network" on FACEBOOK to connect with others interested in natural play environments for children.

space. All it takes is some creativity and helping hands. You can do it. This group did.

'City Kids' is a child care center for infants through preschool-age children located right in the heart of downtown Portland, Oregon. Busy streets, tall buildings, lots of hustle-bustle. Their outdoor space: truly challenging. Small. Entirely covered by the building. Open on only one side. Glass windows on the other side. And a concrete slab base for a floor. Yet, when it was time to renovate their outdoor play area, the staff decided they wanted to create a natural setting for their children. They wanted trees, plantings, gardens, storage, sand, water, climbing, music, and performance areas. Sounds great, but are you kidding? Here??

My playscape design partner, the brilliant Leon Smith, worked closely with the folks at City Kids and, lo and behold,

they were able to realize their dream. Together with local craftspeople and volunteer labor they were able to create a natural oasis in the city. A place for play and discovery and, yes, plants. The children and staff love their new space, and they are an inspiration for us all. It doesn't take a magical landscape to create a beautiful playscape. It just takes a magical imagination and a team of enthusiastic people to make playscape dreams come true.

- Shade plantings bring some life into this covered urban playscape. Planters help divide up the space into small 'rooms' that can have multiple play uses. Play features include a playhouse, musical instruments, talk tubes, a stage, a sand area, a water pump, and a climbing tree.

- An elevated sand area has walls built by a local stone mason, as well as a bench and sand toy storage. The

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water pump allows kids to use their muscles to pump water out of a bucket that is hidden inside the box. Water spills back into the bucket, that is refilled with fresh water after each use.

- The marimba was made by a local craftsman. Community volunteers helped with the sanding, finishing, and planting of the playscape.
- The climbing tree is a section of white oak donated by the City forester. Climbing holds were attached and 4" rubber tile was installed around it for a safe fall surface. Various log rounds were anchored to the ground to act as a border that also has appeal as an interesting step path!