



# How-To Guide

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## Hidden Nooks & Secret Corners

'Hidden' nooks and secret corners offer critical elements for connecting with nature in the outdoor learning environment. While children aren't *really* hidden or obscured from supervision, they can still experience the feeling of being immersed in the natural world. Different from other more active play and learning settings, a 'hidden' nook can provide a sense of calm, quiet, and respite from the flurry of activity typical of children playing hard outdoors.

### Duration



1/2 day

### # of People



2 - 4

### Required Effort



Moderate effort and planning



Photo: Natural Learning Initiative (NLI)



Photo: ECHO



Photo: NLI



Photo: NLI

## Materials

- 2 or 3 Large shrubs or small multi-stemmed trees (native species if possible)
- Shredded mulch
- Compost or organic root inoculant
- Access to water
- Landscape fabric with fabric pins
- (Optional) Logs, stumps, smooth sitting rocks, or tree cookies
- (Optional) Plant protection boundary

## Tools

- Sharpshooter shovels
- Marking paint or landscape flags
- Pick mattock(s)
- Utility knife
- Hard rake(s)
- Bucket, watering can, or garden hose
- Rockbar(s)
- Sharp by-pass hand pruners
- Wheelbarrow
- Irrigation hand tools: pliers, tubing cutters, etc.
- Tape measure



Photo: NLI



Photo: NLI

## Implementation Steps

- 1 Gather materials**
- 2 Prep the area**
  - Cut any existing weeds or grass all the way down to the ground and spread plant debris evenly.
- 3 Cover the area with landscape fabric.**
  - Overlap fabric edges six inches, and secure with fabric pins.
- 4 Layout native plant material in desired locations**
  - Be mindful of the distance between the center of the plants in relation to their mature size. Shorter distances between plant material will create a denser cluster of plants sooner, where children can feel immersed and “hidden.”
- 5 Dig holes**
  - Carefully cut holes in the landscape fabric using a utility knife.
  - For very hard and compacted soils, use a pick mattock or rockbar to loosen before scooping the loosened soil with a shovel.
- 6 Plant**
  - Remove plants from their containers once their respective hole is dug.
  - Loosen roots from the shape of their container to help prevent them from becoming root bound in their new home.
  - Consider tossing a couple handfuls of compost or organic root inoculant, into each hole, and with the backfill, before popping each plant in the ground to help ease the stress on plants from planting.
  - Hand tamp each grass by pressing firmly all around it.
  - Once in place, prune any dead or damaged branches from woody shrubs and perennials.
- 7 Water the plants in!**
  - IMPORANT: Once planted, IT IS CRITICAL to water each plant at its base for 1 to 2 minutes until fully saturated. This will help alleviate the root stress associated with being handled and transplanted, as well as aid in getting rid of harmful air pockets in the soil near roots.
- 8 Place natural seating**
  - Place any desired logs, stumps, sitting rocks, or tree cookies to offer a variety of seating.
  - You’ll only need to add one or two of these seating elements as the spaces are typically small and can only accommodate 2 or 3 children at a time.
- 9 Set up drip irrigation**
  - Be sure that emitters are properly placed at the base of each plant so that each plant receives sufficient water.
  - Once in place, conduct a test run of the system before burying it with mulch. This step will help you spot leaks easily.
- 10 Mulch**
  - Mulch the area at an ideal depth of three inches. While it may seem like a lot at the time, especially for short plants, the mulch will settle. This is the optimal amount of mulch to slow the loss of moisture in the ground, as well as to further deter weeds from popping through. Be careful not to pile mulch against the trunk or bark of trees and shrubs, to avoid potential pest and rot problems.
  - Water the mulch once it is in place to help it settle.
- 11 (Optional) Install plant protection**
  - Temporary plant protection will allow the grasses to recover from the shock of being transplanted and to begin to establish before being put under the stress of compaction from children’s feet.
  - Use a small garden fence or other barrier to protect plants from foot traffic until plants are established.

# Considerations

- **Always call 811 before you dig, to locate buried utilities.**
- If starting in a grassy or overgrown area, try 'scalping' the area with a mower on its lowest setting, or with a string trimmer/weed whacker, cutting the plants down to the soil.
- For REALLY weedy areas, especially areas that might not get regular attention (such as at schools and parks), landscape fabric is recommended to help keep weeds at bay.
- Shredded mulch varieties are recommended for windy conditions as it binds together when it settles, staying in place.
- NOTE: When digging in hard packed clay use pick mattocks and rockbars to break it up, only using shovels to scoop out the loose material.
- For additional resources on gardening in your region, check with your local Cooperative Extension System or native plant society.
- To meet licensing requirements, ensure that the area is designed so that all parts are visible and easy supervised, and contains only non-toxic plants.

# Native plants to include

- ❑ **Large ornamental grasses**
  - Provide forage for nests, cover over winter, and places to raise young for insects and birds.
- ❑ **Large shrubs**
  - Provide food and cover for insects and birds.
- ❑ **Small multi-stemmed trees**
  - Provide food and cover for insects and birds.



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NLI

## Disclaimer

*Before installing new play and learning components in your outdoor learning and play space, please check with local regulatory agencies to ensure compliance with health and safety requirements. While the intent is to provide a general resource for reconnecting children to nature, the authors and program sponsor disclaim any liability based upon this information. PLAE Inc. assumes no responsibility for the design or installation of outdoor components for play and learning. In no event will PLAE Inc. be liable for any loss or damage including without limitation, indirect or consequential loss or damage incurred during the construction or use of the outdoor learning environment.*

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