

CREATIVE PLAY SETTINGS ON A BUDGET

Reimagining your outdoor play and learning space doesn't have to be a huge financial investment. Explore this guide to learn about affordable options for designing and activating your outdoor space for nature play and learning.

Each section includes engaging outdoor play ideas for even the most limited budgets, including where to find materials, how to use them, and other considerations.

Logs, Stumps, & Branches

How to use them:

- Seating & benches
- Pathways & steps
- Natural building materials
- Natural playhouses
- Balancing & climbing opportunities
- Garden bed edging



These simple materials can be used in a variety of ways even within the same space.



Where to get them:

- Tree removal companies
- Landscaping companies
- Recently fallen trees
- Community properties
- Parks & Rec departments
- Online marketplaces

Things to consider:

- Use hardwoods, not softwoods (Red cedar, oak, maple, etc.)
- Sand off protrusions and hazards
- Seal with water-based sealant
- Leave the bark on - you can use it for loose part play!

Plants

How to use them:

- Vegetable, fruit, & herb gardens
- Sensory gardens & fairy gardens
- Sunflower & wildflower patches
- Ornamental grass maze
- Natural playhouse
- “Hidden” cozy nooks
- Defining space & boundaries

Plants can be used to encourage sensory play and to teach kids about living systems!



Where to get them:

- Local garden centers & nurseries
- Local home improvement stores
- Online

Things to consider:

- Use a variety of plants: sizes, colors, seasonality, textures, etc.
- Consider native plants
- Be familiar with water, sun, and maintenance needs
- Use non-toxic species
- Utilize your vertical space
- Prepare your soil if needed
- Install protective fencing while your plants are establishing
- Enhance planted areas with paths, archways, seats, open circles, etc.



Wood

How to use wood:

- Raised planting beds
- Borders & edging
- Loose parts
- Mud kitchens
- Small decks
- Art & project spaces
- Storage

Where to get wood:

- Local home improvement stores (ask for discounts!)
- Lumber companies
- Reuse old lumber (ensure it's good quality)
- Pallet companies or businesses getting rid of used pallets

Things to consider:

- Don't use old pressure-treated lumber
- Remove and sand all hazards when reusing wood
- When reusing pallets, be cautious of splintered wood, nails, and gaps that could be head entrapments

Tires

How to use tires:

- Planters
- Path edging
- Mounds
- Steps
- Games
- Fairy gardens

Things to consider:

- Check each tire for hazards
- Beware of spiders!
- If you're stacking tires stabilize them with bolts
- Drill small holes for drainage
- Don't use tires for your fruit and veggie plants
- Painting tires help keep your plants cooler



Where to get tires:

- Tire shops
- Car repair shops
- Online marketplaces
- Recycling centers





Other Recycled & Natural Materials

How to use them:

- Loose parts
- Tables
- Storage
- Music & dramatic play
- Art & project space
- Sensory play

Where to get them:

- Your families & friends
- Thrift stores
- Yard sales
- Online marketplaces
- Local businesses
- Outside in nature!

Things to consider:

- Avoid choking hazards, protrusion hazards, head entrapments, etc.
- Create temporary activities and settings
- Use your vertical space!

TIPS & TRICKS

Intended Uses

Think about intended uses for these materials.

Maintain & Sustain

There's no such thing as a maintenance-free space! Continue to maintain and supervise your play features for safe, sustained use.

Safety First

Ensure materials are installed appropriately for safety & long-term use.

Licensing & Regs

Confirm local licensing and regulations especially for larger installations - ask your local licensing specialist if you're unsure.

Get Creative!

You don't have to stick to the ideas we mentioned here, think outside the box!

