

How-To Guide

Teepees

Teepee playhouses support whimsical, dramatic, and imaginative play in the outdoor learning environment. As opposed to small teepees used to grow vegetables, these teepees are sturdier, longer lasting, and can be occupied by small groups of three or four children.

Teepees can be constructed in many sizes and materials, however this guide outlines how to build a 6' diameter teepee using tree branches.



ECHO
EARLY CHILDHOOD HEALTH OUTDOORS

Duration



1/2 day or less

of People



2 - 4

Required Effort



Moderate/high level of effort



Photo: Pinterest



Photo: Natural Learning Initiative (NLI)

Materials

- (6) 2 - 3" diameter, 9' long straight(ish) tree branches
- Heavy grit sand paper (40 - 60 grit)
- Non-toxic, water-based wood sealant
- Rope, heavy duty twine, zip ties or other material for lashing poles together
- Marking paint
- Landscape flags
- Access to power
- Sticks (or twine) to use as cross pieces
- Plants or seeds
- (Optional) Organic compost
- (Optional) Plants or seeds
- (Optional) Plant protection boundary
- (Optional) Canvas, burlap, or other pieces of fabric to decorate the teepee
- (Optional) Sitting rocks, logs, stumps, and/or tree cookies

Tools

- Handsaw
- Loppers
- Orbital power sander
- Extension cords
- Paint brushes
- Drop cloth or tarp
- Sharpshooter shovels
- Rock bar
- Hand tamper
- Utility knife or scissors
- Step ladder
- Hose or watering can

Plants

- Native, climbing vines
- Vining vegetables (pole beans, sugar snap peas, snow peas, english peas, gourds, etc.)
- Perennial fruiting or flowering vines



Photo: National Wildlife Federation

Implementation Steps

- 1 Gather materials**
 - 2 Prep the poles**
 - Cut branches to length as needed.
 - Remove any snags, obvious splinters and sharp edges.
 - *Bark can stay intact!*
 - 3 Weatherproof**
 - Seal wooden poles using non-toxic water based sealant. Follow application instructions per product recommendations.
 - 4 Mark out desired location**
 - Using marking paint, mark out a 6' diameter circle on the ground.
 - Use the marking flags to mark each pole location.
 - 5 Dig pole holes**
 - Holes should be a minimum 12" depth to ensure stability of branch poles once they are in place.
 - 6 Place branch poles**
 - Backfill, and tamp into place.
 - Lean 2 of the poles together initially, then add the others to stabilize.
 - 7 Lash poles together**
 - Use rope or twine to fasten the poles together at the top.
 - 8 Add cross pieces**
 - Sticks or twine fastened between poles can be used for vining plants as they grow and climb up the teepee.
 - 9 Plant or sow seeds**
 - Plant climbing vines around the base of each pole, tossing in a handful of compost to the hole before backfilling.
 - As they grow, train plants up the poles and onto cross
 - pieces, by simply draping or loosely wrapping vines where you would like them.
 - 10 Water the plants or seeds in!**
 - **IMPORTANT:** 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.
 - For seeds, the soil should stay moist until seeds germinate, and then plants should be watered routinely.
 - 11 (Optional) Install plant protection**
 - Use a small garden fence or other barrier to protect plants from foot traffic.
 - 12 (Optional) Decorate the teepee**
 - Use burlap, canvas, or other fabric.
 - 13 (Optional) Add seating**
 - Place sitting rocks, logs, stumps, and/or tree cookies
-

Considerations

- **Always call 811 before you dig, to locate buried utilities.**
- Ask your parks and recreation department, local tree companies, and arborists for materials. Keep an eye out in your community.
- For poles, consider using bamboo, bean poles, PVC pipe, or lumber.
- Lumber and tree limbs larger than 3" in diameter should be fastened together with hardware to ensure stability and safety.



ECHO

EARLY CHILDHOOD HEALTH OUTDOORS

Cover photo credit:
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. The National Wildlife Federation (NWF) assumes no responsibility for the design or installation of outdoor components for play and learning. In no event will NWF 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.

For more outdoor project ideas, visit:
www.nwf.org/ECHO