

Balconies, Patios, Porches and Other Small Spaces

1. Natural Construction

Loose parts can still happen in a small space but may need to be an ephemeral event. An afternoon of fort building on the balcony can be a special recurring play activity. Easy to take down when necessary, sticks, fabric, string, and leaves can be reused and recycled as needed.

2. Natural Loose Parts

One of the easiest settings to incorporate into a small scale space is a collection; a collection of natural, seasonal materials, a play surface, and a place to store them. While great on their own, natural loose parts provide even more imaginative play opportunities in combination with other small-scale manufactured items. Provide bins of different small materials, perfect for sorting, manipulating, and creative play.

3. Water Play

Water play is easily incorporated into any size of space. Kids take delight in almost any form of water play, especially in hot weather. Buckets, plastic storage containers, and small kiddie pools can be combined with cups, bowls, and scoops for stationary water play. Try squirt bottles, sponges, or paint brushes with a bucket of water for kids to “paint” exterior walls.

4. Earth and Mud Play

Earth and mud play need not be limited by the size of your space. A large tub filled with soil and scoops on a porch or balcony is just the right scale for young children to dig in. Add water and a few more containers, and a fantastic mud play setting is available with mixing, pouring, squishing, and more.

*Earth play can be just as engaging
on a balcony as in a yard.*

*Natural construction materials are ready
for use in this small corner of the yard.*

*Natural loose parts play can
happen anywhere.*



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5. Acoustic Play

In its simplest form, acoustic play can be created with any sort of noise and music-making instrument stationed outdoors. Porch rails and walls work well for mounted instruments or noisemakers (like chimes). Portable outdoor noisemakers (drums, pans, whistles) can be stored in a container or under a bench, ready to use when inspiration strikes.

6. Sensory Gardens

Sensory gardens are simple to create even in limited places. Herbs are well suited to growing in pots with less-than-ideal sunlight exposure. Try planting herbs along with textural plants like fine grasses, mosses or lamb's ears. Arrange the pots near a gathering place and at a child's height to enable sensory exploration and enjoyment.

7. Fairy Villages

By nature, Fairy Villages are well suited for smaller spaces. Fairies, gnomes, (even dragons) require more imagination than they do space. A planter with fine-textured plants and fairy house materials can fit nicely on a patio. Even a low bench or stump can become the surface for a fairy landscape with a few small materials and lots of imagination.



◀ Fairy villages can be scaled to fit any outdoor space.



◀ Children love to help with yard projects. here constructing and decorating bird houses for habitat.

8. Wildlife Gardens

Wildlife gardens, while more limited on a balcony or small yard, are still achievable. A simple bird feeder or birdhouse (or butterfly or bat house) can increase wildlife sightings, wherever you live. A small yard can accommodate a bird-bath. With a few potted shrubs or fruit trees a much improved natural space will attract wildlife, adding shared interest for children and adults.

9. Edible Plants

Edible plants need sun, water, and soil. Small spaces may be limited in provision of sun. By using pots or planters soil quality can be controlled and space maximized. Keep an eye on your space throughout the day to find the area that receives the most sun, and place edible plants. Herbs, greens, vegetables, even some dwarf fruit shrubs and trees can thrive in containers and small gardens.

10. Sand Play

Similar to earth and mud play, sand play is easily adapted to containers for play in small spaces. A broad container set on a bench can serve as a portable sand table. A larger container set on the ground could be big enough for little ones to sit inside. Mix in a little water and scoops and it's like a day at the beach, all on your own patio.

11. Vine Teepees

With a little creativity, vine teepees can be adapted to decks, patios and small yards. Even without a patch of earth, teepees can be set up seasonally on the porch or patio with vines planted in containers around the outside. Swaths of fabric create shade and colorful hiding places in the winter or before vines have matured.

*This vine teepee offers a pleasant
shady corner on a deck.*

*Sand play for young children need not be
large. Logs and toys add play value by offering
opportunities to manipulate the sand.*

*Many edible plants thrive in
containers, like these hot peppers.*

