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.

Logs, Stumps, & Branches

How to use them:
- Seating & benches
- Pathways & steps
- Natural building materials
- Natural playhouses
- Balancing & climbing opportunities
- Garden bed edging

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!

These simple materials can be used in a variety of ways even within the same space.
Plants can be used to encourage sensory play and to teach kids about living systems!

**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

**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 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

**Where to get tires:**
- Tire shops
- Car repair shops
- Online marketplaces
- Recycling centers

**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
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!

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**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.

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**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!