

From battlefield to family affair

Is it possible to create a garden that's both fun for the children and acceptable for grown-ups?

Cassandra Jardine has the answer

Garden-design handbooks don't tend to mention children. Yet this common pest reduces lawns to mud, hammers plants with footballs and clutters up otherwise pleasant spaces with large, unsightly toys. Small children can be fobbed off with sandpits but as my five have grown older – they are now aged five to 14 – their trampoline, swings, climbing frame and table tennis have taken over and the garden long ago ceased to be a thing of beauty. It became a positive eyesore.

Then my Aunt Caroline died, leaving me some money. Extravagant perhaps, but I decided I would use the funds to redesign the garden. The aim was to provide the children with enough activities outside to get them off the sofas and away from screens, but to use every trick in the designer's book to make the garden aesthetically pleasing.

The big decision was to install a swimming pool. Expensive, but swimming is one of the few forms of exercise that we all enjoy and, with a 65ft-square back patch, we had room for a 9m by 4m hole, big enough for a few strokes each way and deep enough to dive and jump. Since it would be visible from the house, it seemed worth the extra money to have a tiled one rather than a liner or prefab.

But how was I to shoehorn all the attractions into the space? I needed advice. Through word of mouth I found four designers, each of whom, in answer to the question, "How do I make a garden used by children attractive to adults?" did not reply "Wait until the children grow up."

I invited all four – Jeff Hewitt, Charlotte Chesney, Edward Erith and Toby Buckland – to look round the battlefield.

Buckland was particularly cutting: "It's like an old people's home," he said, "with all the chairs arranged around the walls of the room".

If I wanted the hideous, red plastic climbing frame not to dominate, they told me, I should divide up the spaces, create changes of level and, to disguise the pool, introduce strong vertical lines to balance out the oblong slab of blue.

The pool proved the most testing problem. As my garden is square, the designers' advice was to soften the geometric shape either by having a shaped pool – lion's claw, diamond, oval – or, since a rectangle is cheaper, by having rounded organic shapes elsewhere.

Had the children been younger, I might have taken Erith's advice and installed trellis round their play equipment. Had I the money, I might have gone with Buckland's fantasy approach – he loves moated castles and stepping stones arranged like dinosaur bones. If I had the space, I would have followed Chesney's plan for a tree house with a flying fox and pulley for hauling up provisions. But Hewitt's ideas were simple, elegant and, because they didn't involve much construction, relatively inexpensive. I chose his design and his team to do the work.

The trampoline

Hewitt's stroke of genius was to half bury the trampoline. Sinking these massive items completely in the ground leaves a large hole when the children grow up; let them stand proud and you have a big eyesore to screen. The solution was to bank up the leftover earth from pool around the trampoline to create a distracting change of level, while allowing the children to feel they are jumping as high as giants. And, if you leave air vents, the trampoline is no less bouncy.

Swimming pool/games area

We wanted to make the area set aside for table tennis distinct from the pool, so Hewitt suggested creating a slight – about 1ft – change of level, and to use different paving to soften the effect. A row of pale Mexican tiles round the top makes it less heavy. We used non-slip



Picture: MARTIN POPE, JONATHAN BUCKLEY

Indian sandstone which comes in a range of colours and is available as coping, too, so there was no need for concrete around the pool. A curved wall (with niches for interest) behind the pool draws the eye and doubles as a useful bench on which to leave towels. After much agonising, we are erecting a rustic fence between the grass and the pool to prevent small children from falling in.

The swings

These have been casualties of the reorganisation. The previous arrangement took up too much room. We tried to hang them on a tree, but there were neither suitable branches nor sufficient space – so we got rid of them completely and created a child-friendly water feature instead by turning an old trough into a fountain; Hewitt made a spout out of a broken chimney pot.

Planting

When it came to planting, sturdy and architectural had to win over rare and delicate. Strong foliage, lots of evergreens and bright colours – including, surprisingly, blue (see Dan Pearson, page 1) were essential to counterbalance the pool. Barefoot children and regular pool-cleaning meant that our choices needed to be

thornless and not given to dropping too many leaves. We ended up with a mix of common reliables (lavender, roses, viburnum, hostas), spiced up with tropical "accents" (bananas, palms, ginger lilies, echiums, bamboo) and some aromatic Mediterranean stalwarts (cypresses, mimosa and herbs).

Cost

Altogether, including the pool, plants, designer, plumbing and lights, the make-over cost £50,000. I hope my Aunt Caroline would approve; the children certainly do. And the big difference is that I can now enjoy watching them play, rather than fearing the worst.

The designers

Jeff Hewitt worked for Clifton Nurseries before setting up on his own in London. Ring 020 7622 9525; www.hewittlandscapes.co.uk. Toby Buckland trained at Cambridge Botanical Gardens and is now based in Devon. He is the author of *DIY Garden Boundaries* and *50 Weekend Garden Projects* and presents the BBC's *Garden Magic*. Ring 070500 52228; toby.buckland@which.net. Charlotte Chesney lives near the Oxford College of Garden Design where she trained. Clients include Richard Curtis and Emma Freud. Ring 01865 862925.

Jump for joy: the redesign includes (clockwise from top) a new water feature; a semi-submerged trampoline; room for a swimming pool and table-tennis table; sweet-smelling plants chosen to allow children to climb and run barefoot without fear of sharp thorns

Edward Erith trained at Otley College before starting the London Gardening Company. Ring 020 8769 0111; www.londongardening.co.uk.

Suppliers

Tanby Pools, 320 Limpsfield Road, Warlingham, Surrey CR6 9DS (01883 622335). Super Tramp (trampolines and table-tennis sets), Langlands Business Park, Uffculme, Cullompton, Devon EX15 3DA (0800 1971897). Rock Unique (hard surfacing including several kinds of Indian sandstone), Select Garden Centre, Main Road, Sundridge, Sevenoaks, Kent TN14 6ED (01959 565608; www.rock-unique.com).

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