Nature Playground
As a community, and as neighbors and caregivers, our challenge is to provide safe places for children to play and create. However, finding such space in an urban setting can sometimes be a difficult task. A good way to do this is repurposing a neighborhood vacant lot into a pocket park or nature playground that can entertain children for hours. Identify a lot, clear the space, add some shade, maybe a few benches to sit on (for the adults), and some simple items for children to build with, and you are done!

For more information, refer to UNI Vacant to Vibrant: A Guide to Working with Lots, www.uni-kc.org

What is the lot design likely to cost?
The cost of preparing the Nature Playground lot design should be minimal ($50-1,000). Much will depend upon what is already available on the site and how much you want to add. The key is using your group’s collective imagination to design a play space using existing materials and found objects.

How much upkeep will this lot design require?
The largest upkeep factor will be keeping the area safe. This will require raking, trash pickup, watering—if a planted area is added—monitoring “equipment” for deterioration, and possibly keeping local wildlife and pets away from the play areas.

Will installation of this lot design require a professional?
The installation of the Nature Playground lot design should not require professional assistance if you have the help and support of friends, family or neighbors. Refer to the Step-By-Step section on pages 6-7 for lot preparation guidance. Tap into the creativity of the neighborhood by inviting neighbors with good ideas and construction skills to participate in the project. Work assignments may include painting, sanding surfaces, removing nails, pruning trees, drilling holes in rubber tires to keep water from collecting, building fencing, etc. If you do not have the required support or feel unable to tackle this lot design, seek professional assistance.

How long will it take to install this lot design?
While people tackle projects in different ways and at different speeds, the Vacant to Vibrant Guide estimates the installation time of this lot design to be one full weekend with the help of at least two healthy adults or youths. The Guide assumes that all equipment and materials required for lot design have been acquired and are ready to use. Basic lot preparation can be done quickly.

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Let Your Imagination Be Your Guide

The fun part about the Nature Playground lot design is that the only limiting factor is your group’s collective imagination. The design can easily be modified or completely redesigned over time. New items can be added as existing materials wear out. Following are some examples of ways that existing materials and lot features as simple as logs and tree stumps can be put to creative use. More ideas on how to construct or arrange these play space features can be found on page 16 of the Kansas City, Mo., Scattered Sites Guidebook. https://kcstat.kcmo.org/Housing/Scattered-Sites-Guidebook/qijy-9h3b/data

Visit the UNI Vacant to Vibrant Nature Playground Gallery at www.uni-kc.org to view photographs of play space concepts and options.
Before You Start

Be Lead Safe around Garden Soils
Lead-based paint was used in housing built before 1978. If the lot you plan to transform had a home on it, the soil may contain remnants of lead-based paint. This is a health concern if soil particles containing lead are inhaled or ingested at a harmful level. This can happen when working with bare soil, or when soil containing harmful levels of lead is tracked into a home environment on shoes and clothing worn while working on the lot. Children under age six are particularly susceptible to the possibility of lead poisoning because they frequently put their hands in their mouths, and their bodies are small and growing rapidly. Small children should be protected in the lot, garden, and at home.

The Kansas City, MO, Health Department and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency recommend the following actions to protect community members where lead in soil is a potential concern:

• Wear gloves and wash hands after gardening and before eating.

• Keep children and pets IN areas with sand, vegetation or mulch and OUT of areas with exposed soil.

• Leave garden footwear outside and remove and wash clothing used for gardening, rather than wearing it through the house.

• Mulch bare soil until vegetation grows in.

These recommendations are for non-edible gardens only. If your community plans to grow edibles, please consult the gardening resources section in the UNI Vacant to Vibrant: A Guide to Working with Lots at www.uni-kc.org.

Till Safely
There may be times tilling is necessary. However, before you till, inspect your lot for signs of buried concrete or rubble not removed during the cleanup stage. Large debris can ruin tiller blades.

When tilling, wear appropriate safety gear, such as covered boots with socks, long pants, safety glasses, dust mask, and ear protection. Make sure you understand the safe operating procedures of your tiller. Refer to the user’s manual.

Review the UNI Vacant to Vibrant Clean+Green Lot Template for additional information, including soil building tips, on preparing and maintaining your Nature Playground lot. Visit www.uni-kc.org.

Call Before You Dig
Locate underground utilities before beginning your lot design. Call 1-800-DIG RITE (800-344-7483) or 811 at least three days before you plan to start digging on your lot.

Image Source: “Muurame – sandpit”, by Tiia Monto, own work, (CC BY-SA 3.0) via Wikimedia Commons.
What You Need: Shopping List

Shopping List

The shopping list provides a breakdown of potential materials, tools, and resources required to construct the Nature Playground lot design.

This shopping list is designed for a single lot (30 by 100 feet); however, the Nature Playground is best installed on multiple lots.

Materials List

Basic Lot
- Sand
- Gravel (walk ways)
- Newsprint or cardboard

Play Area(s)
- Boulders
- Play logs
- Equipment, see page 8

Planting Area(s)
- Refer to the Clean+Green Lot Design template at www.uni-kc.org for ground cover, tree and perennial plant ideas.
- Check out other UNI Vacant to Vibrant Lot Designs, such as Native Butterfly Garden, Dumping Preventer, or Four Seasons, at UNI Vacant to Vibrant: A Guide to Working with Lots at www.uni-kc.org, for additional planting options.

Remaining lot cover (Optional)

Groundcover
- Fescue Mix
- Compost
Or
- Simply add mulch
(Or refer to Clean + Green Lot Design template at www.uni-kc.org)

Tools + Resources

Suggested Tools
- Marking Paint, Spirit Level, Tape Measure, String and Stake
- Safety Gear: Gloves, heavy work boots, tall socks, pants, long sleeve shirts, dust masks, protective eye wear, ear plugs, and hard hats (if using heavy machinery).
- Garden Tools: Spades, shovels, rakes, trash bags, and wheelbarrows.

Potential Water Sources
- Garden Hose, with potential extension hose
- Sprinkler
- Rain Barrel, in addition to another water source

Resources
- Visit the UNI Clean + Green Lot Design template, at www.uni-kc.org. The template includes a step-by-step guide to soil preparation, maintenance, and how to plant trees and perennials.

Image Source: “Swallowtails love the Butterfly Garden,” by Virginia State Parks staff, (CC BY 2.0).
**Nature Playground Step-by-Step**

### Let’s Start

Want to create the Nature Playground lot design but don’t want to hire a professional? Here are a few guiding principles to help you construct your lot design.

✔ Check off tasks as you go along.

### Lot Design Steps

**Volunteer Opportunities:**
- How to Design a Nature Playground
- Preparing Your Lot
- Adding Structural Features
- Planting Considerations
- Creating Fun, Safe Play Spaces

![Image Source: Tree Stump Seat, Neil Hawkins Park, by Parker D (Wikipedia Takes Joondalup participant) (CC BY 3.0), via Wikimedia Commons.](image)

### How to Design a Nature Playground

To figure out the best place to add play space on the lot, identify where the lot has access points and if it has shade, sun, nearby neighbors or existing structures. Here are some questions that will help with your assessment:

- Is the lot long and narrow with tall buildings on either side, or are there open areas adjacent to each other?

- Are there trees? And, if so, are those trees healthy and in good shape?

- Would the lot play areas work best if they are at different elevations or in a single level?

- Is it better to have several smaller areas for different groups, or a single, larger area for running or games. (For example, are house windows at risk of being struck with a baseball, or could nearby streets be a hazard to children running after a ball.)

- How much area can your group easily maintain?

- Are sections of fence needed so that your Nature Playground is a “good neighbor”?

Visit the Resources Section of the [UNI Vacant to Vibrant: A Guide to Working with Lots](www.uni-kc.org) to discover places to purchase plants, and equipment.
Preparing Your Lot

The Nature Playground Lot design covers a full 30 by 100 foot lot, but multiple lots can be used to create a larger, more usable community space. Select the best location for each part of your design. Preparation will vary depending upon how each section will be used, but to get started:

- Use marking paint and a tape measure to map out the size, shape, and dimensions of your design.
- Clear each area of unwanted plant material and then cover with mulch, sand or compost depending upon whether the area will be used for play or for plants.
- To create walkways, cover the ground with several layers of dampened newsprint or pieces of cardboard to suppress plant growth. Cover to a depth of several inches with mulch, sand or small gravel.
- For areas that have been set aside for gardens, cover with at least 3” of compost.

Adding Structural Features

These pieces will vary depending upon how each section of the lot is used.

- For the playground area, logs, tree stumps, rubber tires, benches, trash receptacles, and other elements, such as solar lighting, may be added (see play space equipment on page 8).
- Fencing may be added to prevent children from running into streets, to protect neighboring properties, or keep local wildlife off the lot.
- If you intend to plant flowers or a vegetable garden, consider raised flower beds to contain gardening soil and compost.

Planting Considerations

Trees and perennials make for an attractive and welcoming space. If you want to add trees to your lot design, plant them before building structures. Visit the UNI Vacant to Vibrant: A Guide to Working with Lots at www.uni-kc.org for a listing of other lot designs with detailed gardening options, including the Clean+Green Lot Design template, which provides tips for conditioning and preparing soils and planting trees and perennials.

Creating Fun, Safe Play Spaces

The following are a sampling of readily available items that can be transformed into play space “equipment” and ground cover.

- **Rubber Tires.** Used rubber tires can enhance a play area in an incredible number of ways. Before setting them out, however, drill an ample number of holes throughout the rims to allow water to drain. This way the tires won’t become breeding grounds for mosquitoes.

- **Wooden Pallets.** Pallets are often used as a base for building any number of structures. Be sure to remove nails and staples and sand down the rough areas. Paint or treat the pallets with a water sealant to boost their durability and cut down on splinters.

- **Tree Limbs.** Depending on the size and shape, tree limbs can be used in many ways. Visit the UNI Vacant to Vibrant Nature Playground Gallery at www.uni-kc.org for ideas. Limbs can be fashioned into trails, bridges, forts and tepees, to name a few uses. As with pallets, check for rough edges, and for larger constructed pieces, remove the bark, which can scrape skin and snag clothing.
Nature Playground Step-By-Step

• **Benches.** These can be as simple as a sanded and stained plank hammered to two tree stumps, or simply use the sanded stumps themselves. Think about placement and if they should be a permanent fixture or moveable. Visit the UNI Vacant to Vibrant Nature Playground Gallery at www.uni-kc.org for ideas.

• **Stump Stuff.** Stumps make great steps and seats, as described above. Consider cutting or sanding around the edges at an angle to take off the sharp corners.

• **Mulch.** A variety of mulch types are available. Mulch comes colored and in different types of wood stock and sizes. Choose a type that best fits the planned use of an area. For example, different colors can mark different play areas, or mulch with larger chips can be placed as a lot border, while finer mulch can be used in play spaces.

• **Other Equipment and Ideas.** While not permanent additions, here are some fun or seasonal items to add to the Nature Playground:
  - **Water Play Materials.** Paint brushes and buckets; tubs for a kitchen area.
  - **Drinking Fountain.** If your lot has water available, this might be a great addition. Installing a fountain might require professional help and depend on whether the lot can be registered with the water utility.
  - **Hand Wash.** Children love water play, mud and all.
  - **Sandy Areas.** These are great for play areas, and to help keep things dry. However, they also require some maintenance, such as regular raking to remove unhealthy or unsafe debris or other items.
  - **Trash Receptacles.** These are important for keeping the lot safe and tidy. Be sure to have a plan to empty them regularly.
Did you know?

**Helpful Hints and Tips**

- Play is important to childhood development. It helps children relieve stress, gain self-confidence, build new skills, improves their ability to solve problems, and gives them opportunities to try new things. All children need a safe, secure play space and Nature Playground can become just that for the children in your neighborhood.

- How many times have we heard the remark, “They had more fun with the wrapping paper than the toy inside”? Put children together in a safe place to play and chances are, they will.

- Remember that drawer of junk in the kitchen that entertained children for hours—right in the middle of where you were working? Children are extremely inventive and have great imaginations. Consider making kitchen items—spoons, pots, etc.—available in your Nature Playground.

**Put Nature in Play**

The Nature Playground lot design was created in the hope that it can provide children a place to play that is also a place to interact with nature. The intent is to encourage imagination and discovery, along with the opportunity to spend time outdoors in a setting that hasn’t been paved and manicured. In addition to the natural materials used in the lot design, consider adding a planted area for butterflies and other pollinators, a rain garden, or maybe even a small vegetable garden. **UNI Vacant to Vibrant: A Guide to Working with Lots**, at www.uni-kc.org, includes lot design templates with a variety of garden options.

**Share Creative Ideas**

If you have an idea for designing and developing a Nature Playground lot design or images you would like to share, please contact us at www.uni-kc.org.
Draw Your Lot
UNI Vacant to Vibrant: A Guide to Working with Lots
www.uni-kc.org