

What is a family garden?

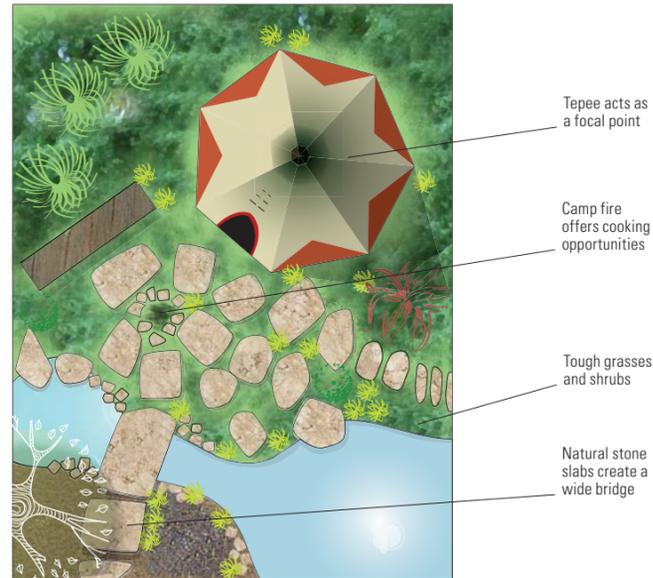
A family garden can be almost any style that has been adapted to provide a flexible space for games, room for entertainment and play, and an area for dining. The smallest of gardens can accommodate a sandpit or swing, while larger plots have space for separate adult- and child-friendly zones.

FAMILY GARDENS IN DETAIL

The concept of the outdoor room celebrates family life. Terraces need to be large enough to accommodate a dining table and chairs, with space for a barbecue or even an outdoor kitchen.

For play, there are two schools of thought: structured play relies upon equipment, but children have different needs as they grow, so flexibility is important. For example, a small sandpit located close to the house allows parents to watch their young children more easily; then, as they grow and move down the garden to seek more adventure, swings, slides, and climbing frames can be introduced.

Unstructured play provides a rich and interesting environment in which children can be encouraged to take some risks – building dens, pond-dipping, climbing trees, and watching wildlife. This requires a more subtle approach to design and one in which parents cannot be too precious about their gardening exploits, giving preference to the needs of their inquisitive children.



NATURAL PLAYGROUND

Designed by Chuck Stopherd of Hidden Garden, this garden (right) for older children offers valuable opportunities for outdoor play. The tepee, firepit, and pool, hidden behind trees, provide a natural setting for children to take risks and explore their environment.



A 1950s family garden designed for play.

DESIGN INFLUENCES

The opening up of the garden as a family facility is a relatively recent occurrence, although outdoor dining *en famille* has always been a tradition in Mediterranean countries. Thomas Church's book, *Gardens Are For People*, which was first published in 1955, changed perceptions of the garden and signalled a move away from intensive gardening and towards the development of the outdoor room. Later, John Brookes developed these ideas in his designs and his 1969 book *Room Outside: A New Approach To Garden Design*. Today, gardens are places of enjoyment, education, and fun for families to share.

KEY DESIGN ELEMENTS



1 PLAY EQUIPMENT

The children's area can feature large items of play equipment, such as a swing or climbing frame. If space is limited, some items may still be included by adapting a pergola or similar structure.



2 COLOURFUL MATERIALS

Splashes of bright, primary colours are an essential ingredient in a family garden. These can be introduced via planting, equipment, or hard landscaping.



3 DENS AND TENTS

Part of the children's area could include a den: a place of their own where they can extend their imagination through play. It may be sited within view of the house or tucked away in a corner.



4 TOUGH PLANTS

Plants have to be versatile and tough to withstand rough treatment from children and pets. Closely planted, often with some evergreens and seasonal colour, they must also be easy to look after.



5 WILDLIFE FEATURES

Ponds with sloping sides to allow creatures access, boxes for birds, habitats to give shelter to hedgehogs, and plants to attract bees and butterflies, are all ideal for family gardens.



6 EASY-CARE SEATING

Seating needs to be suitable for children and adults. Furniture that can be left uncovered all year and requires the minimum of care and maintenance is the most practical.

