

How To Make an Empty Nester's Whimsy Garden

Chances are good, if you've ever had children, or even grandchildren, who are now grown up, that you have a mountain of plastic or metal outdoor activity toys sitting around outside. Mind you, I'm not talking about the dolls the kids left out in the rain and forgot about; I'm talking about the outdoor toys; kiddie pools and plastic picnic tables and doll carriages and riding toys and the like. Probably half of them don't work anymore (unless you're really terribly practical--but then, if you're that practical, the toys probably didn't stick around much longer than the kids). But, if you're like the rest of us, you can't bear the thought of getting rid of those childhood mementos. Maybe the grandchildren will want to play with them one day. Maybe the great grandchildren will want to play with them. Regardless of the excuse, most of us hate to let go of our kids' childhoods.

A new trend in landscaping and home decor may allow you to enjoy the best of both worlds; to keep the toys and yet not look overly sentimental about doing it. This trend, known as 'whimsy gardening', takes ordinary household objects--a bathtub, for example, or a kitchen sink--and fills them with plants, then makes them a part of the landscape. The only requirement for the object is that it be able to stand up to outdoor weather, and children's toys, providing they were designed to be used outdoors in the first place, certainly meet that requirement. We have toys in our yard that seem to have been around longer than we have.

Your first task is to select the location for the toys. Try to arrange them in ways that feel fun, fresh, and spontaneous. Get a couple of neighborhood kids to come in and play with them for a couple of hours, and have them leave the toys lying around. That always gives a nice, 'unfussy' feel to the layout. Regardless of how you end up getting them to their places, they should NOT be put in straight lines, and they should never be orderly. After all, the point here is whimsy, and when was the last time your kids put their toys away in neat, orderly rows? Mine never did.

Now, there are two ways to proceed from here. One is to plant directly into the toys, which has a more 'natural' feel, as though the toys had just been sitting there casually and plants had sprung up in them (I've had that happen a couple of times, come to think of it, when I wasn't careful with my weeding). The downside of this method is that it may rust out or otherwise damage the toys, metal more than plastic, to have the soil in direct contact with the toy. Also, it has the downside that if the plants die, they have to be replanted. If you have more than one plant in, say, a baby carriage, it can get tricky to replace it without damaging the other plants while doing it.

The second method is to plant into pots, and then set the pots into, on, or among the toys, rather than planting directly into the toys. It gives more of a structured feel to the whimsy garden (and heaven forbid we should ever be structured in our whimsy!) but it has several advantages; for starters, it doesn't rust the toys out, which planting directly into them can do. Oh, there will be some rust; these are old toys, and they've lived through a lot. But you extend the life of your whimsy garden by years if you don't plant directly into the toys. Second, if a plant dies, nothing could be more simple than changing out the pot and putting a live one in its place. The same goes for changing out plants when the seasons change, or even when you get bored with a look. And, last but not least, using this method allows you to take the pots out of the toys and set them off to the side when those grandchildren or greatgrandchildren come to call. After all, you knew there was a reason you had kept them.

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