

NO TREES? NO PROBLEMS

Elevated playhouses are made for fun

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Don't pity the city slickers with no trees. Or their brethren, the ones whose trees aren't big enough.

They may not be able to build tree houses, but the backyard alternatives they can create have the potential to be just as good, if not better.

Just ask the Kastner family. They spent months searching for the perfect trees for building a tree house in the ravine by their Sylvania home, with no success. So they quit looking and made their own by putting up a few stilts.

Before long they had a two-level structure with a trap door, retractable drawbridge, and wraparound deck. The only question left for them was what to call it.

"That was a family discussion one evening," said Mike Kastner, 52, who has three sons under the age of 17. "I said: 'What is this, guys? Is it a tree house? Is it a fort? Is it a summer home?' We came to the conclusion that we don't have a name for it. ... At any moment, any child can call it a fort, a tree house, or a playhouse."

No matter what you call them, play structures that don't incorporate trees in the blueprint are everywhere and getting more deluxe all the time.

The Ziegler family of Sylvania Township built an elevated playhouse for their son, Newt, a few years ago that has a small climbing wall, a slide, a wraparound deck, and a zip line that can whisk him 50 feet away. The inside is stocked with baskets of plastic animals and beanbag chairs.

Lori Ziegler said she and her husband had thought of just getting a prefabricated playhouse or swingset, but wanted something that their son, now 6, wouldn't outgrow as quickly.

MULTIMEDIA

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Jeff Paxton, with his son Logan, built on top of his garage. (THE BLADE/JEREMY WADSWORTH)

"Since he's an only child ... he looks for places he can play with his friends," she said. "That's the big attraction: his friends like it."

And they don't seem to mind that it's not perched in the crook of a tree.

"We call it a tree house and we treat it as a tree house," she said. "It's so much into the trees — even though one isn't supporting it — it pretty much looks like one."

For those not up to building something themselves, there are companies that can make sure that even though you don't have a tree, you don't have to be denied a tree house. Daniels Wood Land, based in California, has fanciful creations that are set on fake tree stumps instead of real trees.

"Our motto is: Tree houses that come with their own tree," said operations manager Andy Dauterman, who grew up in Bowling Green.

Designs start around \$5,000, but he recalls one shaped like a giant pirate ship that exceeded a few hundred thousand dollars. It came with Internet access, running water, and more.

"I can guarantee that the adults enjoy it just as much, if not more so, than the kids do," Mr. Dauterman said. "I

think a lot of parents are kind of living out their childhood dreams with their children.”

Speaking of dreams, that’s exactly where an alternative tree house built by Jeff Paxton, of Kansas, Ohio, appears to have been conceived.

Perched atop his garage is a play structure that resembles something out of a cartoon. It has a curved roof and hand-cut shingles. The whole thing looks positively crooked and out of perspective — intentionally — which is part of its charm.

He built it on top of his garage because the two trees in his yard weren’t suitable for a tree house, and there wasn’t enough room left on his lot for a playhouse.

It sure beats the tree house Mr. Paxton had as a kid.

“Actually,” he said, “it was more like a four-by-eight sheet of plywood.”

Mr. Paxton doesn’t think he’d do anything differently with his “garage house” if he had it to do all over again. Still, there is one thing that puts its future in jeopardy.

“I want to replace my garage.”

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