



**Treehouse style**  
Childhood hideaways go upscale D1

### Santa Rosa

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# Home & Garden

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The McBride family built a backyard hideaway fashioned like a mountain cabin. Ululani McBride and her 3-year-old daughter, Makaila, stand on the front steps of the one-room hut underneath a fruitless mulberry.



Charlie Prowell built a treehouse in an oak in Sebastopol. The house includes a lift built with pulleys and counterweights.

## Rustic look fosters imagination

By MEG MCCONAHEY  
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Not everyone is a licensed contractor or can afford to hire one to build a pristine little hideaway for the kids.

Sebastopol woodworker Charles Prowell suggests parents contemplating a backyard hideaway project stick to basics and go for the rustic, desert-isle look — the kind of no-frills place that fosters elaborate flights of imaginative adventure.

That was what Prowell was shooting for when he designed and built a leafy hangout for his neighbors' son, Robin. It quickly became a gathering spot for kids from all over the neighborhood, including Prowell's own son, then only 6.

Prowell counsels parents not to go overboard.

"Kids don't want a super clean tract home type playhouse, or a dollhouse on stilts. They want something 'Tom Sawyer-ish,'" he advises.

"There's a tendency in treehouses and forts for the dads to take over and it ends up being more for them and less done with the kids in mind. Kids appreciate something funkier. They're intimidated by perfectly built miters."

Raised on a farm in Illinois, Prowell had a treehouse set to an ancient elm and an underground fort extracted with a back-hoe and roofed with huge slabs of steel plates, and which he shared with water moccasins, frogs, salamanders and muskrats.

With those fond memories in mind, Prowell strove for a structure that was more "organic" with the tree that would play host to it. He selected an old oak that had been a favorite among kids for a century. A neighbor in her nineties, he said, used to play in its gnarled branches.

Prowell has some advice for anyone contemplating a rustic treehouse project. For more detailed information, check out his Web site. It includes plans, photos and links to other treehouse Web sites that offer a wealth of information: [www.prowellwoodworks.com/treehouseplans.htm](http://www.prowellwoodworks.com/treehouseplans.htm).

Keep it small enough so it doesn't have to meet code. The California Uniform Building Code (Section 602.2) used by most communities requires no permit for tree houses as long as they have no electricity, plumbing or perimeter foundation. Classified as tool shed, playhouse or storage shed, they are not to exceed 120 square feet. Prowell suggests not going too high for safety reasons. Of course, the height of the treehouse might be dictated by how far up the tree starts branching out. It's ideal if you can build the house or deck around a branch.

TURN TO TREEHOUSE, PAGE D3

By MEG MCCONAHEY  
Photos by KENT PORTER

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

There is no address on the mailbox. If you simply saw a picture of it, you'd assume it was a pricey little Queen Anne cottage tucked into a leafy old neighborhood.

But this tidy Victorian is tucked into Anita Rackerby's backyard. It's electrically wired, cable ready, completely landscaped and less than 100 square feet.

She says it's for the kids and, indeed, inside are the signs of child life: a window seat filled with Barbie dolls and dress-up clothes, a china hutch with miniature porcelain tea set and a table covered with boxes of brightly colored paper, glitter and beads.

But don't be fooled. This is a grown-up's dream come true. It took Anita Rackerby the better part of her life, but she finally has a playhouse — one with stained glass windows in the dormers, tile floors, redwood wainscoting, a cozy loft and window boxes filled with geraniums.

Folks of a certain age probably remember their childhood hideaways as blankets thrown over a clothes line, a grungy toolshed, the crawlspace under the porch or furniture packing boxes duct-taped together.

But just as the once modest tract home has distended into the starter mansion, the backyard playhouse is also gaining square footage and creature comforts.

The Rackerby playhouse in northwest Santa Rosa has a wall heater and portable TV and VCR.

"I always wanted a playhouse," Rackerby confesses. "I used to go the Laundromat and get the little boxes of soap. I'd run home with them and wash my doll clothes and hang them on lines. I played dolls for years."

Four years ago, the mother of three decided to act out her fantasy and build the playhouse she had always wanted. She roughed out a drawing on paper

TURN TO HIDEAWAY, PAGE D2

## Playhouses with Pizazz

Big imaginations transform back yards into hideaways for kids



A Victorian-style hideaway built in Anita Rackerby's backyard has low-voltage electricity and a loft. The hideaway is decorated with discounted items found in stores and at flea markets.

## TREEHOUSE: Salvaged wood perfect for back yard

CONTINUED FROM D1

Six to 8 feet is a good safe height.

Materials can easily be found through salvage places, such as Recyclatown at the County Landfill, 500 Mechem Road, Petaluma. (Stock is down now while the county builds a bigger facility. Pickings should be better when it's completed in about six months). Building sites are also a wealth of salvage material. Of course, ask the job foreman before taking anything. But often they're happy to have you haul it away. Places like Home Depot, Yardbirds and Friedman Brothers also will stock anything you need.

Elevate the house with posts to avoid lagging into the tree. Lagging can damage the tree. And as the tree grows, it may structurally weaken the treehouse.

Be careful not to damage the tree root system when setting a structure with postholes. To avoid this problem use pier blocks.

Rolled bamboo fencing is an excellent and affordable material for a thatched roof effect. This can be stapled over the roof rafters with a layer of builder's plastic under it for protection from rain and finished with a second layer of bamboo for a thatched appearance inside and out. For a more weather-proof roof, start with a half-inch CDX-grade plywood over the rafters, followed by a layer of 15-pound felt and finally, the bamboo on top of that.

Half walls usually 42 inches high (either solid or railed) with supports between the half wall and roof rafters, allow for an open structure that eliminates the condensation that results from closed, uninsulated walls. When the walls are open, it becomes more a part of the tree than if it were closed off with walls. These open walls can be shaded with bamboo shades.

For accessories, a bucket on a pulley is indispensable for hauling up important provisions like peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and other necessities. A folding ladder with a pulley that pulls up the ladder as the child climbs prevents small children from climbing up and risking in-

### BOOK SHELF

Reference and how-to books for building backyard hideaways:

"Backyard Play Areas You Can Make: Complete Plans and Instructions for Building Playhouses, Forts, and Swing Sets." Paul Gerhards, \$18.95.

"Playhouses You Can Build: Indoor & Backyard Designs." By David R. and Jeanie Stiles, \$14.95.

"Tree Houses You Can Actually Build." By David R. and Jeanie Stiles, \$18.

"Treehouses" (The House That Jack Built Series). David Pearson, Editor, \$16.95.

"Treehouses: The Art and Craft of Living Out on a Limb." By Peter Nelson, David Larkin (Editor), Paul Rocheleau (Photographer), \$19.95.

(Local bookstores usually can special order any book. These books also are available through Amazon.com and were highly rated.)

jury when not supervised. (See Prowell's Web site for details.)

Battery lights make the easiest and most cost-effective artificial illumination. Make sure you buy rechargeables.

Conserve inside space by making simple modular furniture, hinged to the walls. A sim-

ple table and benches can be made to fold down from the wall.

For communication, forget the cell phones. Two tin cans connected with a 3/8-inch rubber hose can keep kids in the treehouse in communication with mom in the kitchen, or pals on the deck.