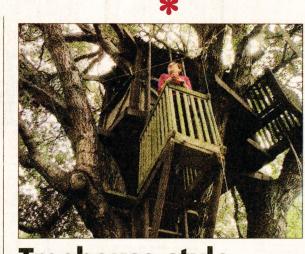


SATURDAY, AUGUST 4, 2001 • SANTA ROSA, CALIFORNIA



Treehouse style

Childhood hideaways go upscale D1

Garden

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Santa Rosa

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SECTION D

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THE PRESS DEMOCE SANTA ROSA, CALIFORNIA

RELIGION & ETHICS D6 THEATER LISTINGS D5 ANN LANDERS D7



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.

Photos by KENT PORTER THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

By MEG McCONAHEY

here 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 neighbor-But this tidy Victorian is tucked into

Anita Rackerby's backyard. It's electrically wired, cable ready, completely landscaped and less than 100 square 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 But don't be fooled. This is a grown-

paper, glitter and beads. 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 wainscotting, a cozy loft and window boxes filled with gerani-

ums. 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 crea-

ture comforts. The Rackerby playhouse in northwest Santa Rosa has a wall heater and porta-

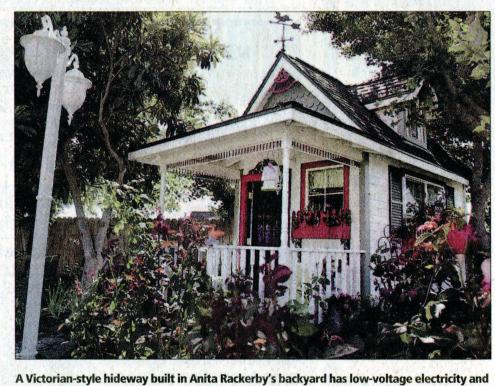
ble TV and VCR.

"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 She roughed out a drawing on paper TURN TO HIDEAWAY, PAGE D2

Playhouses with 726777

Big imaginations transform back yards into hideaways for kids



a loft. The hideaway is decorated with discounted items found in stores and at flea markets.

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

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 hide-

away 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

'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 musk-

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.prowellwood-

works.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

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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 Recycletown at the County Landfill, 500 Mecham 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 ond layer of bamboo for a out. For a more weather-proof felt and finally, the bamboo on top of that.
- from rain, and finished with a secthatched appearance inside and roof, start with a half-inch CDXgrade plywood over the rafters, followed by a layer of 15-pound 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 haul-

ing up important provisions like peanut butter and jelly sandwichs and other necessaries. 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.

available through Amazon.com and were highly rated.)

- "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

jury when not supervised. (See Prowell's Web site for details.) ■ Battery lights make the easi-

- est and most cost-effective artificial illumination. Make sure you
- buy rechargeables. ■ Conserve inside space by making simple modular style fur-

niture, 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 co

nected 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.