Case Study 1

This nursery school had an outdoor area that was less than satisfactory and staff were keen to develop it into something special. Although there had been several discussions and some money saved, there hadn’t been any developments. There was a small area of grass and most of the area was tarmac. There was a small wooden climbing frame and this area was separated from the rest of the space by rows of car tyres.

The head teacher attended training on managing a project, run by Learning through Landscapes. The training incorporated valuable information on risk assessments and the safety aspects of any major development, including the management of building and site work. It was intimated that it is important to involve the whole community, not just the staff.

A day was set aside for discussion on developing the outdoor space and parents and governors were invited to attend. The first part of the morning was set aside for brainstorming ideas about what people felt the space should offer. There was a strong feeling that it should be a garden and not just an outdoor play space. People were asked to write down any ideas they had regardless of cost. There was also time to discuss any concerns. Safety was a major issue for some staff members. By the end of the morning session the following wish list was in place:

- some fixed climbing equipment made as far as possible from natural materials, so children are challenged to climb, swing, balance and jump. Zigzag balance beams, stepping stones and logs;
- a sandpit with pulleys and a raised platform. Storage for sand equipment and a suitable cover;
- a hill with a tunnel and slide – and a waterfall!
- an open-sided house with a table;
- an area for digging;
- a separate area for planting and harvesting;
- a natural meadow;
- a bird hide;
- a pond with a built-in safety mesh cover;
- a child-friendly water feature/fountain;
- a water butt with pump;
- a maze or cobbled spiral;
- pergolas planted with clematis to make low dens and shelters;
- an area with stones, logs and planting (ferns) for mini-beasts;
- a big hollow log and tree trunks;
- a wall mural with mosaics, shells, etc.;
- separate areas with hidey-holes, quiet corners;
- tables with weatherproof tops and built-in storage underneath;
- seating;
- parasols or canopies for shade;
- a sensory garden;
- raised beds;
- planting that gives seasonal colours, scents and textures;
- planting that also provides shade;
- wind chimes, sculptures and artefacts from different cultures and countries;
- linking pathways wide enough for wheeled toys and smaller pathways made from a variety of different materials to provide interesting textures;
- an interactive rockery planted with grasses and small conifers but designed so children can safely play on it and use a variety of small world-play resources;
- a stage area for role play, dressing up, music;
- a space for outdoor musical instruments;
- mirrors;
- a large thermometer and possibly a sundial;
- an area that could be used as a creative workshop using natural materials;
- an open play area for blocks, roadways, etc.;
- cover for rainy days.

During the afternoon session, people split into three groups. Each had an A3 sheet of drawing paper, on which the boundaries of the plot had been drawn to give a rough idea of scale, and they were asked to come up with a design. All designs included many of the features on the wish list, and, interestingly, some of the wish-list features did not appear in any of the designs. Space was a factor and although everyone loved the idea of the meadow, it would not be possible to include because of the space available. Two designs included a wildlife area.
The next step was to consult the children. They were shown a video from Learning through Landscapes and in small groups discussed what they would like to have in their school garden.

They suggested:

*Trees, grass, beautiful, colourful big flowers – flowers all around, blossom, ... somewhere to dig ... a nice bush, with leaves on it, with flowers on it and bees, ... a magic garden, ... a walk, ... a fence, ... a mural, ... a new red shed, ... a mosaic wall, ... a flower bed, ... rocks and stones, ... a mirror, a pergola, ... a tree with sweetsies on, ... a maze!*

*A pond, frogs and tadpoles, ... butterflies...*  
*Flies, ...insects, ... a bird hide and binoculars, ...*  
*Climbing, a tunnel, a monkey run, a bridge, ... a slide, a swing, ... football, playing place, .... ladders, sand, ... a castle and a caravan!*  

They were also given a selection of gardening magazines and cut out pictures that they liked. Simultaneously, gardening magazines were left in the staffroom so staff could browse through them and cut out anything that appealed to them. These cut outs could then be stuck onto a montage on the noticeboard.

Children were also asked to draw their ideas for a garden. These were collected and, together with their verbal suggestions, given to the designer. The designs from the adult groups were also given to him.

The designer visited the school several times and talked to children and staff. Together a final plan was agreed. The nursery applied for funding, which at that time came from the government for specific early years projects. The bid was carefully prepared with references about how this garden would support and enhance children’s learning. Costings were given, as well as details of the nature of the involvement of parents, staff and children. The school was successful and work began on stage one.

**Stage one: groundwork and reconstruction**

The basic work involved digging up the tarmac, removing the debris to form a mound in one corner and putting the outline design in place. There was enough money at this stage to build and fill the sandpit and make tunnels and stairways. Walkways and bridges could be included later.
Under the mound was a tunnel that was just big enough for children to run, crawl or ride through. The mound was later planted with a variety of plants and incorporated steps, a built-in slide and a wooden ramp.

**Stage two: planting**
The school applied for more funding. A successful application to the council meant that some larger trees and plants could be included. Palm trees were chosen to add a Caribbean feel and also large plants to suggest a jungle. Children enjoyed planting these and a wide selection of smaller shrubs and bulbs.
The school also entered a national competition. Another bid was carefully prepared that included details of how the children would be involved and the benefits it would bring. The area for development was a wildlife area and included a small pond and specific plants to attract bees and butterflies. It also had an area for digging and natural spaces for logs, log seating and ferns. The school came second overall in the competition and the money awarded enabled this work to be completed.

**Stage three: finishing touches**
Final touches were funded by the school budget and by funds raised by the children and their families, who could see what was happening and were keen to help. Some sculptures and tuned percussion were added to the garden. Parents were kept informed and involved. They helped to organize a cake sale to raise money for the crocodile fountain and bronze leopard.

**Stage four: using the garden**
The children just couldn’t wait to get outside and many staff attended training on outdoor play. Planning systems were redesigned and planning for outdoor play became much more detailed, as staff observed children in the garden and were able to develop children’s own interests and themes. Children wanted to go out every day in all weathers, so as well as buying waterproofs for children, there were adult waterproof jackets supplied in the staffroom, so there could be no excuse!

A garden is never complete and as staff and children continued to work outside, other ideas evolved. It also became evident that there was some degree of maintenance required, so a sum of money was allocated each year for the upkeep of structures as well as further development. Practitioners from other settings also visited and were able to get ideas for developing their own garden spaces.
Parents too were aware of the significance of the garden in their children’s lives and made positive comments:

[T]he garden is truly amazing. It is such a pleasure to visit the garden every day. My son loves coming home and saying he wants to be a gardener …

[T]he garden is excellent – fantastic for outdoor informal learning, sounds, basic concepts of science (water nature life, motor skills on climbing area, sandpits, planting etc. Also most importantly it is a very safe environment.

[A] lovely garden full of secret things for the children to discover and enjoy.
Case study 2: shared space

St John’s is a preschool situated in a church hall that is used by several other groups. There is an outdoor space, but this is accessible to the general public at times when it is not in use by the preschool. It is part of the church grounds and there are restrictions to development because the church is a listed building and the site is on a flood plain. However, the preschool have been able to install new fencing to make the outdoor space secure. They cannot leave plants outside but instead use jute planters for their crops. These are easily moved as the planters have handles on them. They can be lifted into a place of safety and then brought back for children to observe and water.

Children in this group have used coir to plant potatoes and herbs in. The coir blocks were placed on a builder’s tray and children worked in pairs to add water to the blocks. They watched carefully as the blocks began to disintegrate and enjoyed digging, touching and squeezing the compost.

Where’s all the water gone? It’s magic.
It smells of chocolate.
It’s all hot.

O. began to sing spontaneously: The farmer’s making compost, the farmer’s making compost!

Their language focused on how much more compost there appeared to be as it absorbed the water. Turn taking was encouraged as they shared the water jugs. Once the process was complete they filled a planter and planted a variety of herbs, smelling each in turn and looking at the labels.

As the manager said, ‘We have to take the garden to the children!’
Case study 3: day nursery

Stagecoach Montessori Nursery is situated in an old court-house building belonging to Elmbridge Borough Council. The classrooms are on the first floor and there is no direct access to an outdoor area. Next door there is a vacant house and overgrown land also owned by the council. We were keen to obtain this to develop a garden for the children. Negotiation with the council was key and eventually we got their agreement to rent the land for an annual sum. We then needed to obtain funding to begin work.

A project manager was appointed. Three estimates were obtained for clearing the ground and submitted to the local authority as part of the funding bid. The children said they would like to have places to run, climb and picnic. We brainstormed what we wanted in the space and drew it onto a rough site plan.

This plan was submitted to the local Early Years and Childcare team together with a written bid written showing how it would meet requirements of EYFS.

We obtained quotes for all the proposed work and equipment. We also planned money for storage sheds, shade canopies and plants.

Stage one: preparing for development

The first task was to arrange for the site to be cleared. We used a contractor, as it was heavy work and sometimes dangerous. The area had been used for dumping and lots of metal, glass and needles needed to be removed and disposed of safely. Brambles and nettles were over 10 feet high and the only way we could get measurements for estimates was to walk around the outside.

Once the site was cleared, it became possible to see what we could have and we spent time in the space just sitting and thinking. We needed to hold on to our original vision but also other ideas came into our minds.

Stage two: constructing the garden

Although a site plan had been drawn up, as we began work, things began to change. For example, we needed to resite the vegetable plot to get more sun.

We also needed more storage and our carpenter built two sheds for us. We now have a cabin for keeping wet weather gear, all the gardening tools and hand washing equipment.
We decided to have some artificial grass as maintenance of real grass would be difficult and expensive. Most of the ground had been concreted over and removing this would be very difficult and costly.

All the existing trees were left around the edge of the land and we used the raised area under one of these to create a fairy mound. The carpenter made small pieces of furniture and children play there and write messages for the fairies.

Two large canopies were fixed to a wall of the house and we used the wooden pallets from a delivery to make a very large table for painting and craft work. Children can access all the materials they need from resource trolleys.

**Stage three: finishing touches**

Originally we were going to buy a large climbing frame. This was expensive and our local Early Years and Childcare service were not keen on fixed equipment. We realized that children need to have opportunities to develop upper-arm strength as this helps with their writing. We were able to buy traversing holds and install them into an existing wall. Parents were keen to help paint the wall and have Walt Disney characters, but we needed to keep the feel of a garden so palm trees and plant shapes based on the leaves in the garden were used instead. Parents and friends came to help with weeding, laying weed preventer and spreading bark.

A log space was built using upturned logs cemented into the ground. This can be used for anything that the children want to use it for. A few large plants were bought to plant in the bark space. One garden centre let us have a large plant at a discounted price as some of the leaves were brown. We have planted bamboo, as it will spread and children can then have spaces and dens in the bushes.

We put down railway sleepers to create flower beds all the way around. Children brought in a bulb each and we saved vouchers to get free trees from Sainsburys.

Grasses in pots were placed under a tree to make a quiet space. Children now love to use this. We bought a raised lookout shed and children can use the space underneath it for dens. We had a lot of discussion about whether a handrail and bars were needed but decided to observe the children first. It soon became evident that the younger children managed the steps safely and in a different way to the older children.

**Stage four: ongoing development**
The space is still evolving and new eyes have new ideas. We recently used an alleyway to create a music space. Hooks on the walls, beaters and bangers of all sorts and even the drainpipe and the old dustbin are used by the children.

Staff have commented:

Making this garden was incredibly hard work and at times it hardly seemed possible. Now, however, watching the children use the space, it is worth all the effort.

The benefits to all children are huge and in particular it has helped some with additional needs. One boy has ADD and attention and learning difficulties. Outside, however, he became very involved planting tomatoes. He was focused and organized and dug his hole, planted the plant and watered it regularly. He also told all the children how to do it. This was shared with his parents who were able to do the same activity at home thus sharing and reinforcing this. Another rather quiet and shy girl suddenly showed an aptitude for climbing and went up the outside of the lookout tower without using the steps. She was nicknamed ‘Spiderwoman’ and her self-esteem has increased as her peers recognize this skill.

Everything is possible if you have the determination. At times the going was tough but now we are reaping the benefits and are inspired to continue to develop our garden.
**Case study 4: forest school session**

Key: J = adult leader; four children = A, S, J and Z.

**Background**

A group of six children are currently attending a weekly session for six consecutive weeks in woods adjacent to their preschool. The leader is a member of staff who is working towards her final accreditation as a forest school leader. She goes out with the children with one other helper. Risk assessments are completed and parental permission is sought beforehand. She also checks and prepares the site before each visit. The children learn the rules about boundaries in the first session and are reminded at the beginning of each following session. There is a focus activity during each session and this week it is den building.

**Session**

Four children attend this session, two being away on holiday. In the classroom, the children are reminded about suitable clothing and any necessary additions are made from the nursery cupboard. The group looks at Freddie – a doll wearing suitable clothing and who has his own little rucksack. Children carry their own rucksacks and decide they also want to take binoculars. Two children pull a storage trolley on wheels that contains a variety of resources that may be needed.

After leaving the setting, the group stops in a grassy clearing. Small laminated pictures are hanging at different levels in adjacent trees and bushes. Children collect them, walking over rough ground and negotiating low brambles. After they are collected and brought back, the children sort them into categories according to whether they might be found in the woods.

A picture of a musical note provokes discussion about sounds and whether we hear music in the forest. A girl watering plants symbolizes the need to care for the woods. Children are reminded how they must tidy up and leave everything as they find it. They hear the rule about what to do if they feel lost: the child should stand still and shout ‘One, two, three, where are you?’ The adult replies ‘One, two, three, we are here’ until they find each other.

On arrival at the site there is a tarpaulin over a campfire area. Logs are placed around and the children know that to reach their seats they must go around the back of the circle. A kettle is placed on the fire and the leader talks about how they will light a fire next week.

A: I don’t like fire, the smoke hurts my eyes.
J: That’s why we will be very careful when we light our fire and use dry wood so there isn’t much smoke.

The children look in Freddie’s rucksack and take out a toy house. The focus of this week is introduced by the question, ‘How can we make a house in the woods for Freddie?’

The group move to an area where J. has placed a pile of long coppiced branches. Each child has their own pair of gloves. One branch has been placed as a cross piece between two trees and the children soon get the idea of carrying them to place against the cross bar. The rule is that if the branch is longer than the child’s height, they need someone else to help.

As they work cooperatively in this way there is much discussion about the length of the branches and the children realize that one end of the cross bar is lower, so shorter pieces are placed at one end.

S: We need a door – this is the door. (Indicates the highest end.)

Z (aged 3): This is a lovely house – all people can go in it – people from all over the world.

J leads the children along a narrow grassy track to collect large ferns. She uses secateurs to cut them. Children carry them back.

S: I’ve got an umbrella.

They stretch to hang them up and use small pieces of string to attach sticks and leaves to the branches. They enjoy using the secateurs to cut some of the bracken stems into small sections, which they want to tie onto the twigs.

S: (Having difficulty making it stay up) I need some help.

A: (Moves over to help and ties the knot successfully) See, I’m an expert at doing knots. (Takes a piece of moss and sits in the shelter.) This moss could be some salmon. (Holds up a small chunky piece of wood.) This could be bread and these are our knives. These are sausages.
I: It’s making me hungry – I’m going out to look. (Returns with some leaves.)
I: We need another door in case there’s a fire or an emergency – that’s the real
door we go in and out.’
S: I’m going to have a look out of the window.
(They begin to negotiate roles.)
Z: I’m a boy I can be the daddy.
I: Yes, I’m a man I’ll be the grandpa.
A (holding a bunch of grass): What could this be? – you think of something?
All: Maybe it could be some salad... Yes and we need some tomatoes.
I: I’ve got a tomato tree and a cucumber tree – I’ll go and get some. (Goes off
and finds some leaves to bring back.)
(J asks if she can come into the house.)
A: Yes, this is the grownup’s door (pointing to the back). This is the boy’s door –
do you want to see upstairs? That’s where we sleep.
J: Yes please.
A (running out of the den): Come on. (The others follow A back to the base.)
A: This is where we sleep.

As they have all returned to the base, they wash their hands in a collapsible bowl with hand
wash and water. They sit down around the campfire space and have a snack of hot chocolate
and forest fruits, cheese and breadsticks.
After this the children return unaccompanied to their den where they play freely, sometimes
together and sometimes on their own.
Adults are used when they need help to extend their game, for example:
We need to find some more sausages. We need sticks.
How long do they need to be? Finger length or arm length?
Children used measurements based on their bodies when working with wood, for
example, stick thickness is measured according to how many fingers wide it is:
Is it as wide as one or two fingers?

There is some discussion of and reference to a dragon – in the previous session the children
moved into the fantasy world when they made fairy houses and needed to protect them from
the dragon. They did this by mixing ‘dragon poo’ and painting it on leaves near the fairy houses.

One child asks to paint – an activity they did last week. J. provides brushes, water and half coconut shells as containers. They mix together their own paint out of leaves, sand and soil, whatever they find on the forest floor. They all become deeply involved in painting the branches of the den with this mixture, and are reluctant to clear away when it is time to go. They use clumps of grass to clean out their own paint pots and help pack everything away into the wheeled trolley and their rucksacks.

On the way back, they sit down and J. tells a story about some children. The group interact and together they replay and elaborate on the story of building the den. J. takes small twigs and decorates them with whatever she finds at hand to make a small stick figure of each child in the story. They discuss what the children would like to cook in their camp with each child in the group given time to offer an idea – sausages and beans, chocolate and marshmallows. After this meal the children in the story snuggle down in their sleeping bags on the mossy ground and go to sleep.

Can we have another story?

No, I’m afraid it’s time to go back to preschool.

Comments and ideas to adapt for use within your setting

The guiding principles of forest school are to:

- make the most of the outdoors as a real context for learning
- utilize the outdoor environment as a rich source of natural materials and resources for learning
- offer first hand experiences and enable children to use all their senses to develop a natural curiosity.

The size of your plot will dictate to a certain extent the nature of the activities, but in previous sessions, for example, children have made houses for fairies in a small space using natural materials. If you want to make a den it is possible to obtain coppiced branches and you may need to bring in some bracken to make a roof. Otherwise children can make a den out of a kit comprised of a piece of fabric and some ropes and pegs. It is important to set the ground rules
so children know which spaces they can and can’t use and about the safe use of tools, ropes and secateurs. Even if you have a small space with a tarmac surface you can adapt this by bring in some additional resources. A ‘magic carpet’ gives the same sense of adventure. By providing a range of small natural materials you should be able to stimulate imaginative play such as that described. You may be able to set up a floor space or sand tray with bits of moss, leaf mould, grass and small leaves, where children can make their own ‘paint’ mixtures. The storage trolley on wheels was bought at a garden centre and could be useful for settings that need to be cleared away at the end of each session. In these sessions children’s social skills were developed and even the youngest child who had not attended before became integrated into the group. As children became familiar with the spaces adult support was only necessary to extend their own thinking and learning goals.

**Observation skills game**

Using laminated cards in part of your outdoor space encourages observation skills as well as language for classification. You could make a set of objects found or not found in a garden and maybe vary it according to the time of year.

**Story time**

A storyteller can use a range of natural materials, for example, the simple sticks with leaves and grass on them to represent each child mentioned previously kept the children fascinated as they held their own figure.

**Reference**