

# A Place to Read is a Place to Grow

Learning to read — and learning to love reading — can play a fundamental role in a child’s development into a curious, thoughtful, open-minded adult. In this age of electronics, it can be challenging to bring a child who is used to the hyper-energy of a video game down to the quieter energy of the written words in a book. But once a child is “hooked,” they’ll be readers for life! With some planning and the incorporation of specific design elements, a youth garden can be an ideal place to encourage reading.



## Consider Garden Layout

Reading can be a solitary activity, or provide some one-on-one youth-adult time, or be a group activity. Try to build in a variety of spaces to accommodate each of these. For the solitary reader and for one-on-one time, for example, create curving paths that lead to secret nooks where readers can have some respite from distractions. Spaces for group reading activities should be located a distance away from these quiet spots.

## Some Privacy, Please

The natural elements in a garden — plants, birdsong, trees — make it an ideal sanctuary; that is, until a boisterous group arrives nearby. You may not be able to guarantee quiet time, but you can provide visual barriers to help reduce distractions. For example, you can create special reading “rooms” with:

- Well-placed hedges
- Vine-covered trellises
- Rows of tall planters filled with upright grasses or shrubby plants

If you’re on a tight budget, you can try these tricks:

Take straight 1” to 2” diameter sticks from pruning jobs or found in the woods (with permission if necessary) and “plant” them in the ground about 6” apart. Weave smaller, pliable sticks between them to create a woven fence/barrier.

Pound in wooden garden stakes a few inches apart. You can leave them natural or paint them first. (It’s fun to paint two adjacent sides one color, and the other two a contrasting color, so when you walk by the colors change.) Weave strips of fabric between the stakes for extra privacy. Tie or staple each piece of fabric to a stake to keep it from blowing away.



## Seat Yourself

Providing an outdoor chair may be cost-prohibitive for many gardens. Here are some other options:

**Tree stump seats.** You may be able to find an individual or company that can provide cross-cut sections of trees in a variety of heights to accommodate youth of different ages as well as adults. Newly cut stumps will likely ooze sap, potentially ruining clothing, and may have splinters, so be sure to cover the stumps with a waterproof fabric. Older stumps that have had time to age and dry can be painted on top

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with multiple layers of outdoor paint to ensure sap-free, splinter-free seats. Provide spaces with one stump for solitary readers, a short and tall stump for youth-adult time, and a circle or semi-circle of stumps for group reading activities.

**Leopold benches.** The design of this bench is simple and comfortable. And it offers an additional benefit surely appreciated by naturalist Aldo Leopold: When you sit backwards on it and slip your legs through the opening between the seat and the rail, the rail offers a comfortable place to rest elbows while holding binoculars — or perhaps reading a book! Aldo Leopold was a pioneer in the conservation movement whose work in wildlife ecology influenced the establishment of wilderness areas in the U.S. In his book *The Sand County Almanac* he wrote of his belief in a “land ethic” that encompasses all communities — soil, water, plant, animal (including human). How fitting to outfit your school or youth garden with benches named after him! Here are [plans for building a Leopold Bench](#).

Read how KidsGardening partnered with Illinois-based PT Holdings to [build a school garden in the Chicago suburbs](#), which included Leopold benches.

## Shelter Me

There are loads of ways to use natural materials, including live plants, to create special hideaways that are perfect for a child to delve into a favorite book.

Draw a circle or other shape and sow seeds of tall plants like sunflowers to create a house: [Plant a Sunflower House](#).

Plant a bean teepee by lashing together the ends of six to eight 8’ lengths of bamboo. Stand them upright, arranging the bamboo pieces to create a teepee that’s about 5’ in diameter at the base. Push the bamboo pieces into the ground for stability. Plant a few pole bean seeds around each piece of bamboo, leaving a section unplanted as a door. Learn more about [growing beans](#).

If you have access to cuttings from a willow tree, you’re can create a special living tunnel. Take 6’ long willow branches and insert the cut ends into the soil about 6” apart in two rows about 4’ apart. Tie the tops together with twine to create a tunnel. If you’re lucky, the willow cuttings will take root, and you’ll have a leafy structure that will last for years to come! (Willow cuttings root relatively easily.) And even if they don’t root, you’ll have a stick structure.

Looking for something quick and flexible? Keep a few umbrellas on hand to protect young readers from the sun. This way you can move your shady nook to enjoy different spots in your garden.

## Accessorize Your Reading Garden

Consider these ways to outfit your garden to inspire young readers:

- The Little Free Library® has [building plans](#) for small book shelters/book-sharing boxes.
- An oversized mailbox mounted on a post can hold books, chalk, pens, paper, etc.
- Create an outdoor blackboard where kids can write down words they don’t know, so they can look them up later or ask others for help with the definition.
- Have kids use waterproof markers or paint to write words on small, flat rocks — be sure to assign nouns, verbs, and adjectives. Then bring the rocks outdoors and let them create poems when they take a break from reading.
- Install signage with quotes about reading around the garden. For example:

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- “If you don’t like to read, you haven’t found the right book.” – J.K. Rowling
- “Books are a uniquely portable magic.” – Stephen King
- “Today a reader, tomorrow a leader.” – Margaret Fuller
- “Reading brings us unknown friends” – Honoré de Balzac
- To read is to voyage through time.” – Carl Sagan
- “Once you learn to read, you will be forever free.” – Frederick Douglas

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