

NEW PLAYGROUNDS GET A GREEN TOUCH

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Across the nation, going green is becoming child's play as increasing numbers of communities and schools are transforming traditional playgrounds into more natural, sustainable and eco-friendly play spaces. As they do, the jungle gyms of yesteryear are being replaced with structures made from sustainable building products and recycled resources, while other playgrounds have been built to utilize the natural terrain to create a world of fun for kids. Regardless of the type, these sustainable spaces are becoming a major player in the green movement.

Many manufacturers of commercial and residential playgrounds are getting creative as they work to create equipment from recycled materials. Today's market includes plastic structures made from items like milk jugs, plastic cartons and bags, and even old flip-flops. Additional playground systems are now built from recycled steel, while other wood structures utilize timber from Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)-certified producers that are treated with non-pollutant conditioners.

Green materials are also being used for playground surfaces. Among these green alternatives is rubber mulch made from recycled tires. Unlike its wood counterpart that can rot, mold, deteriorate and breed insects, rubber mulch is a durable, low-maintenance option that can hold up for a lifetime. Synthetic grass is another playground surface option that is quickly replacing natural grass. This maintenance-free surface is weather-resistant, can withstand heat, rain and foot traffic, and never needs mowing, watering or fertilizers.

Locally, The Goddard School® in Edwardsville, Ill., has invested in a new, earth-friendly playground, which features a synthetic, anti-microbial grass product, called XGrass. The playground was unveiled this spring, and Barbara Burrows, owner of the school, says the space is helping students get more enjoyment from the outdoor environment.

"We decided to make this capital investment in our school so that the children could play in the safest environment possible – free of allergens, fertilizers and unsanitary surfaces," said Burrows. "Prior to this investment, we had regular grass and occasional worn areas and found that it eliminated our ability to allow the children to play outside after rain, and we like them to be exposed to the outdoors as much as possible to fit the goals of the Goddard Systems curriculum. We are very pleased with the outcome and hope our families are too."

While many schools and communities are investing in playgrounds featuring recycled materials, others are utilizing the terrain to design natural playgrounds. As an alternative to purchasing pre-made equipment, natural playgrounds use landscaping techniques to create outdoor adventure areas that incorporate organic elements like sand, water, wood and living plants. For example, mazes can be formed with cut hedges, forts can be made from tall grasses and slides can be built into the terrain. These playgrounds encourage kids to use their imaginations and learn to appreciate and experience the outdoor environment.

"It's great to see this movement towards greener playground options," said Susannah Fuchs, Senior Director of Environmental Health for the American Lung Association of the Plains-Gulf Region. "Not only are green playgrounds healthier for kids and better for the environment, they also help promote improved air quality."

Specifically, recycled materials play an important role in waste reduction, and less waste means fewer emissions in our air. Alternative playground surfaces are also good for our air quality because emissions-forming lawn equipment isn't required for maintenance. And, natural playgrounds promote cleaner air because nothing has to be manufactured to create them."

To learn more about the Goddard School's new green playground, visit www.goddardschool.com or call (618) 692-9464. For information on ways you can do your share for cleaner air, visit www.cleanair-stlouis.com.