

What About Maintenance?

by Ron King, President

Natural Playgrounds Company LLC @ www.naturalplaygrounds.com

Frequently, after we make our presentation about natural playgrounds, we're asked about maintenance. "What about maintenance? Isn't there a lot of maintenance on a natural playground? We couldn't possibly handle more of it; our maintenance department is already having trouble keeping up!"

Behind the questions are two implications: (1) that we haven't thought about maintenance on natural playgrounds; and (2) that manufactured playgrounds full of equipment are maintenance-free.

What we find most interesting about people asking the question, is that after seeing our slide show, excitedly participating in the discussion about natural play, and ooing and ahing over the photos of beautiful, challenging, exciting natural playgrounds, they choose to frame the maintenance question with negative overtones, and assume it's going to be a real stumper.

So here's our response.

There is always upkeep, no matter what kind of playground you have. Worn out grass needs a rest or needs to be replaced, compacted woodchips need to be replenished or replaced, equipment needs frequent inspections, worn equipment needs to be replaced (usually about every 10 years -- at GREAT cost), lawns need to be watered, fed, and mowed, unclean or worn sand needs to be removed and replaced, leaves need to be raked, snow needs to be removed, arid environments need dust control, and so on.

So let's break it down. First of all, anything that's alive needs care. People need food; so do lawns. Hair needs trimming; so do shrubs. Both people and plants need water.

Even if something is not living, it requires maintenance. Houses need painting, shingles need replacing, windows need cleaning. Cars need oil changes and their tires get worn out. Elevators are constantly inspected for wear.

So all environments require maintenance of some kind, even “sterile” ones, which require an enormous amount of filtration equipment.

Will the maintenance of a natural playground push your maintenance department to the limit?

Well, no, not really. They can actually be a maintenance dream! These are *natural* play environments, after all, so there are lots of great options, the first of which is the best:

- You can just let them grow and do what they do! After all, they’re supposed to be natural environments, just like what you might come across if you were out for a walk in the woods or in a field.
- You can get the local garden club to work with the kids to maintain the butterfly garden.
- You can set aside half a day in the fall and spring as a work day/maintenance day for the entire school, organized by students, with parent volunteers helping out. Can you imagine the organizational and work skills the kids will learn, and how proud they’ll be of their accomplishments?
- Natural playgrounds are outdoor classrooms, so each class can learn and do what it takes to care for a corner of their world.

So the real question is: where would you rather have your children spending time? In a dead zone where nothing is alive, like on manufactured playgrounds full of woodchips, plastic, rubber, and metal? or in an area full of life?

Which is going to make them better people in the long run? Which is going to give them the gift of understanding and appreciating nature? Which is going to calm them and make them less stressed? Which is going to prepare them to be stewards of our fragile planet? Which is going to help them integrate numerous sensory inputs?

With the decreasing time children are allowed to spend outdoors and in touch with the natural world, our natural playgrounds sometimes provide the ONLY opportunity children have to be with nature, so the experience ought to be the best it can be: full of life, of things waking and sleeping, of insects and moss, of birds and butterflies, of things that can be discovered, of quiet places, of challenges, of things that don't break, but just keep adapting, of things that stimulate thought, of things that are beautiful.

If an adult does not want to understand the value of nature and its ability to heal us fragile humans, they will rally behind any number of arguments, the meaning of which are truly irrelevant and very uncreative.

The argument about maintenance fits in that category.