**Be Nature, Use Nature, Follow Nature: Explore Nature Backyard Environment Transformation**

1. **Draw a map** of your outdoor environment.
2. **Reflect** on the current design and materials and consider what natural elements that could add to enhance the environment.

**Include Several of the Following Spaces:**

1. Open Area for Large Motor Activities (Wheeled toys, Space for Duck, Duck, Gray Duck)

2. Climbing/Crawling and Dynamic Equipment Area (Swings, Slides)

3. Music and Movement Area (Music Wall)

4. Nature Art Area (place to create and design mud pies and mosaics)

5. Building Area (blocks, sticks, ramps)

6. Gardening Area (or pathways through planting)

7. Gathering Area (a place to sit and read/relax)

8. Messy Materials: Water, Sand, Dirt-Digging areas)

9. Storage Area

10. Materials, toys (including loose parts), tools for exploring and measuring

Think: \* Free \* Repurposed \* Natural \* Neutral \* Loose parts \*

**For pictures of other Nature Explore environments (many in Minnesota!) Check out:** <https://certified.natureexplore.org/certified-nature-explore-classrooms/>

**TIPS:**

* Use what you have! The best places for nature play have already been designed by nature.
* Create a natural area for play, not a playground with a nature theme. Many nature play areas consist of activities and materials that could be also played with inside, just the same as outside. This is outdoor play, not nature play! Instead, seek to engage children with nature: catching bugs, digging holes to China, building their own den in the pine trees, finding cities under rocks and logs, collecting leaves, watching the clouds, etc. Every major activity should encourage real interactions with real nature.
* Work to reduce or eliminate plastic and bright, unnatural primary colors.
* Don’t over design. Start small, design with the lower end of your expectations and build from there.
* Be creative with your space. Create the feeling of hiding by sing tall grasses, shrubs, vine covered fences, to create outdoor rooms.
* Use natural dens: small clearings in tall grass, pine trees forts, shrubs, gardens
* Don’t go overboard or waste money (think cheap tent, an old canoe, vine or branch teepee, free wooden spools, logs).
* Try to keep it naturalistic by avoiding the use of plastics and bright primary colors (think landscaping).
* Incorporate places to climb, fallen tree, making music, dirt/sand, logs natural habitats, gardens, water play
* Wildlife. Extensive native plantings for food, shelter, and nesting, along with water sources (birdbath) Include nesting boxes, a brush pile, a toad house or two, an **insect garden**, and **micro-habitats** (stump, log)
* Planting/tending a vegetable garden is a great experience for young children, but it requires long-term, on-going involvement. Plant some “pick-able edibles”like raspberries, peas, green beans, chives.

**Things to consider:** Supervision and developmentally appropriate spaces for I/T, Natural Materials: how can you incorporate natural materials, including trees and other live plants, into the environment? Maintenance: how does your environment allow for durability and low maintenance of the space? Relevance: How can you use regional materials/plants, artwork, and ideas from children?