



IDEA  
GARDEN



## CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE

*A family backyard makes room  
for play, wonder, and just the  
right amount of risk-taking.*

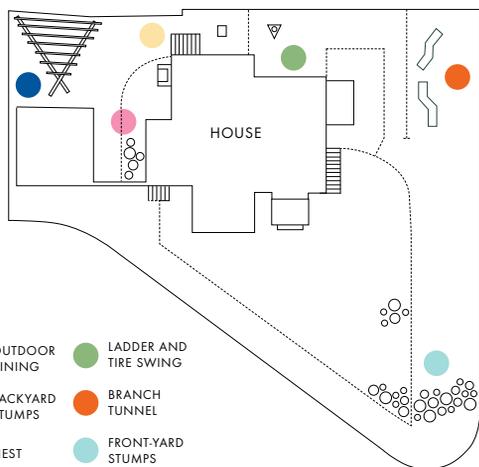
*By Johanna Silver*

*Au naturale*  
MULTIPURPOSE  
STUMPS  
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**An** East Coast native, Sari Lehrer had a clear idea of what a backyard should be: “a flat expanse of lawn.” But when she and her husband, Eli, moved from Manhattan to Los Angeles, their new home challenged that notion. Instead of soft green grass, the yard featured steep slopes and concrete drop-offs—all the more unsettling because the couple had a 20-month-old daughter and another baby on the way. “You haven’t known fear until you’ve watched a toddler try to navigate concrete steps without a handrail,” Sari remembers.

Over time, though, Sari let a different vision for her yard take shape, one that was inspired by the book *Last Child in the Woods* and its notion that unstructured outdoor play is good for kids’ development. With the help of landscape designer Samantha Gore (*theyard.me*), Sari gave the hillside space an enchanting new look, adding willow tunnels, tree stumps, and a gigantic nest perched in a tree to encourage exploration. “When kids come over, I see this ‘holy smokes’ reaction in their eyes,” Sari says. “They can’t believe they can really dig and climb.”

Since everything is built from natural materials rather than chunky plastic, the backyard is still sophisticated enough for adult dinner parties. And as her children (now totaling three—ranging from ages 2 to 8) get older, Sari has grown to appreciate the elasticity of the design. The kids often drape climbing structures with fabric for forts. Hide-out spots double as reading nooks. “Eventually, I might even get a little time with a book in the willow nest myself,” she says. “But we’re a long way off from that!”



THE WILLOW TUNNEL



ALFRESCO DINING



STUMP SEATING



## FRONT-YARD PLAY SPACE



## LADDER AND TIRE SWING



## Kid-tested, mom-approved

### REIMAGINE THE CHILDREN'S TABLE

A patch of artificial turf softens a concrete patio (page 41) while stumps create a seating area for both pretend tea parties and larger gatherings. "When we entertain, the kids sit here," Sari says. "They get their own space, but they're still in our sight."

### SHRINK IT DOWN TO THEIR SIZE

A small willow tunnel (top left) adds a secret-

garden quality to a path. "Tunnels can be created out of many things," says Gore.

"Let a shrub or tree grow to the ground and trim back the undergrowth. Or weave willow wisps or green cuttings from an acacia or a grapevine."

### REMEMBER THE BIG KIDS TOO

A dining table (far left, middle) gives grown-ups a place to kick back. Spineless Agave *attenuata* keeps things

green with little maintenance.

### GET STUMPED

Gore loves tree trunks for children's outdoor spaces, both because they're a natural repurposed material and because "they can be rearranged endlessly," she says. In the front yard (left), the Lehrer kids use them as oversized steppingstones.

### LET 'EM CLIMB

One of the two wooden structures (above) is



“The play spaces let the kids feel like they’re off doing wild, illicit things, but they’re not actually in danger ... so I’m not having a heart attack.”

—SARI LEHRER, HOMEOWNER



used as a ladder, jumping platform, and lookout tower, while the other supports a fire swing.

**TAKE IT TO THE TREES**

Suspended from a loquat tree in the

backyard, a grape and honeysuckle vine nest (above), made by artists Didi Beck and Dylan Hostetter, serves as a hideout, complete with cushions and peepholes. “For the kids, it’s pure

magic,” says Sari. “They feel like they’re floating in midair.” She anticipates the nest will become a solo refuge for the children as they get older and start seeking more alone time. 🌿

**S DIGITAL BONUS** Give the kids a fun-filled outdoor play space they can enjoy all summer long: [sunset.com/kidsyard](http://sunset.com/kidsyard).