

Building a treehouse requires thought, work – and a tree

BY NANCY SUNDRAM
Special to the Record-Eagle

Whether you're an adult or a child, there's just something special about a tree house.

If you've never had one, you no doubt longed for one. If you did, you may recall a small hideaway from the rest of the world especially those bigger, pesky people who can sometimes complicate life.

A tree house is a space that is essentially a platform high above the ground, often without a roof and with only the sky and tree branches up above, all of which allow nature to surround you.

When my family moved to the east side of Traverse City about five years ago, our house came with two acres of land, something unusual within the city limits. Our son, Christian, who is now 10, loved running through the woods in back of his new home, and it wasn't long before he vocalized his wish for a tree house.

Being primarily raised in suburbs without a chance to have a treehouse of our own, my husband and I enthusiastically endorsed his idea, even though we had no idea how to go about building one.

Fortunately, it's not hard to find someone who has been through the process, plus the Internet is loaded with ideas about how to commence with such a project.

The first thing we learned is that a proper tree house involves basic design and safety criteria. Beyond that, it can be as simple or as complicated as one would like, depending on time, interest and pocketbook

issues.

Most interesting of all was learning that unlike a playhouse, a tree house is essentially a build-and-design-as-you-go project because it involves tree, of which no two are alike. Building a safe and long-lasting structure is critically linked to the health and strength of the tree (s) you choose. In the end, that means that you have to protect the tree while building the structure so that your children will be protected while playing in it.

Recognizing that, we thoroughly researched but were still clueless in some pertinent areas, we enlisted my father, Ernie Sundstrom, a recently retired mechanical engineer, skilled carpenter and level-headed thinker with an eye for detail and an obsession with getting the job done right. Bringing him into the effort proved to be the smartest move we made.

"The first thing I took into consideration was the safety of the kids who would be using it, and part of that was looking at their ages, heights and weight," explained Sundstrom. "That's also largely a function of the trees that will support the house. You need good support whether you're up in the air and fastened to the trees or you're supported from the ground. The tree (or trees) serves as the foundation, so it has to have a strong trunk and branches and it has to be healthy and living."

When the correct trees were chosen for a design that put the house platform (one-story) about six feet up into the air (allowing our son to "spy" down on the

rest of the world and feel that he was up in the trees), we found a horizontal plane in the tree where a level floor could be built and determined point of entry and exit.

As the primary inhabitant, Christian was brought in as a project consultant and decided he wanted a ladder, as well as a fireman's pole to slide down. Both seemed practical and safe ideas.

Crew chief Ernie Sundstrom decided to go one step further with walls that were high enough so children couldn't easily fall over them and a trapdoor in the middle of the floor.

The biggest challenge came in determining how to fasten the weather-proof, treated lumber platform to the trees and get it level. Internet research paid off on that one, particularly at www.onthehouse.com. It pointed out that because trees are alive and growing, the house needed to be built to accommodate their changes.

To do that, we connected to the three using nails and construction screws, with lag screws for more stability and duration. We avoided using rope, cable and wire, as they can strangle tree limbs.

Next, we tackled fastening the floorboards to the floor framing and the floor to the walls.

If the tree house is going to have a roof or partial cover, uprights consisting of



Photo/Nancy Sundstrom

Research, tree selection and a lot of hard work went into Christian Byington's treehouse in the backyard of his family's Traverse City home.

4 x 4 posts should be installed before the floorboards are. Posts will also be needed as support for a rail that will surround the entire perimeter of the tree house. This is a safety requirement. All posts should be attached to the floor frame using nuts, bolts and washers. Use two bolts at each connection.

While we did not opt for a roof, we realized that while one can keep tree house occupants dry, it is the rail that will keep them safe from a fall that could happen from rain or dew being on the floor surface. The rail consists of support posts, a bottom rail fastened to the floorboards, a top-cap rail fastened to the inside face of the support posts

and the pickets. The rail can be solid or made of pickets from fence boards spaced no more than 4 inches apart.

In either case, the material should be fastened from the interior so outward-thrusting movement cannot weaken the rail.

The finished product, while it would most likely not win any design awards, was one that met our son's needs, insured his safety and was built with most of the major concerns in mind. We used the typical, conventional equipment to build it, meaning a good hammer, saw, square, nails and screws, ladder, tape measurer, etc.

We frequently asked for Christian's input and had

him try things out as we were going along, often involving him in building to help increase his sense of ownership in the project.

"It was very rewarding to work on that tree house and to think that you accomplished the task for your grandkids and their friends," said Sundstrom.

"The main thing is to make sure the house is supported and that a few people can help you with the project. Don't be afraid to over-design. Check your local ordinances and codes, and be sure not to obstruct a neighbor's view. And beyond everything else, have fun doing it."

Nancy Sundstrom is a local freelance writer.

See-through duct tape a clear improvement

BY PATRICIA DANE ROGERS
The Washington Post

At long last: a duct tape to match the plastic sheeting in our safe rooms. 3M has rolled out a transparent duct tape, that, unlike the familiar silver variety, is virtually invisible.

Though not recommended for use on flues, chimneys, mufflers or tailpipes, the company maintains that its new Scotch Transparent Duct Tape lasts six times longer than other heavy-duty duct tapes and is strong and sticky enough to patch a garden hose, seal a window or repair a lawn chair. The

suggested price is \$5.99 for a 20-yard roll and \$1.89 for a four-yard roll, at home centers and hardware stores.

Americans buy about 1.5 billion feet of duct tape annually, according to 3M, (that's \$150 million worth) with occasional sales spikes during Code Orange alerts.

3M also makes red, yellow and green duct tape plus the silver. Several other companies, including Henkel Consumer Adhesives' Duck brand, offer a camouflage pattern (www.duckproducts.com). Can stars and stripes be far behind?

Outdoor living

Who wants to hang out in their dusty, bug-ridden garage? No one, according to Garage Door Screens, which is why they developed Fresh Air Screens.

The company says the screens transform garages into more livable spaces and allows users to benefit from fresh air and sunlight without pests.

The screen installs with a hook and loop material and has zippers, which enable entry without unhooking it. It rolls up when not in use and can remain installed.

Fresh Air Screens are available in regular and custom garage-door sizes. Prices begin at \$89 for a 6-by-7-foot screen. Purchase and other information can be found at www.garage-doorscreens.com.

Control your light

A new system puts control of your home's lights within easy reach. Heath/Zenith's budget-priced remote lighting controls lets you operate lights from anywhere in your house. You just plug or screw in an adapter, then use the remote control to give commands for on, off and dim.

The device controls both indoor and outdoor lights. It can be used to control the lights from your car when arriving home.

No electrical wiring is needed. A single remote control has two channels, so it can operate two sets of lights. Any number of lights can be controlled with each channel.

Prices range from \$13.99 for an individual component to \$27.99 for a kit.

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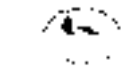
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