

Dom's Garden

Resident horticulturalist Dominic Teahan is here with answers to all your gardening questions.

We have a huge lawn that our three pre-teen kids and all their friends have made the neighbourhood playground. It's great to have the kids around, but all those not-so-little feet have made the lawn an unattractive mud bath. Can you recommend hardy grasses to replant? How long would they take to grow? Is fake grass expensive?

- Lawn Mourner

Dear Lawn Mourner,

This is a familiar dilemma: Can a garden exist alongside kids? Yes! There are numerous options available.

Firstly, you could re-sow your lawn. There are numerous grasses available that have been refined to meet demanding local conditions and activities. I would recommend 3 types: Couch, Kikuyu and

Buffalo grasses. Couch can be often seen at sporting ovals. It's very durable and recovers quickly from any damage. Kikuyu is another popular grass used in areas of high use and is easy to grow and quick to establish. To ensure adequate preparation time and variable germination rates you should allow at least 12 weeks for an established lawn. This type of grass is usually mixed with another growing variety such as Rye to help to minimise any weed competition in the germination stage and is relatively inexpensive at about \$1/m.

Instant turf is your second option. Although more expensive than sowing (about \$10/m) it has the added advantage of having almost 'instant' results. Things to consider include the preparation time for laying the turf and the maintenance required in the



Kids at play can be hard on a lawn

Photo: Kate Tapping

establishing stage. This might require removal of waste soil and existing grass as well as replacement soil, and watering and top dressing during the initial growing stage.

The final option is synthetic turf which is also the most expensive at \$50/m. If you consider the money you could save on ongoing maintenance of a 'natural' lawn alternative this may be the choice for you. It has the advantage of low maintenance, no mowing, watering or fertilising and is designed to take almost any amounts of foot traffic. It also has a consistent appearance regardless of use, weather or environmental conditions. There are DIY kits available to reduce installation costs as well as various layout and design options.

My wife and I have retired to a spot in Mornington Peninsula. I want to grow a small native garden, but my son has young twins that will visit often and haven't got over the stage of putting everything in their mouths. Are there any

especially poisonous plants I should avoid?

- Green Grandad

Dear Green Grandad,

The Peninsula is a particularly beautiful spot and congratulations on wanting to embrace the native plants of Australia! It's not uncommon to find plants in gardens that are in some way poisonous. As a rough guide, if a plant has a strong smell, milky sap or red berries, there's a high chance it could be poisonous and should be considered a risk. The good news is that many of these types of plants have been introduced to Australia.

There are, however, certain native species to avoid, especially with the presence of toddlers. The White cedar tree (*Melia azedarach*) has round, fleshy yellow fruit less than 2cm in diameter. It is highly toxic and only 5-6 berries could be fatal if consumed. Kangaroo Apple (*Solanum aviculare*) also has toxic berries and leaves and is easily self-sown.

Other more common natives such as Grevilleas can

trigger rashes and itching on contact, while the Eucalyptus has poisonous bark and leaves and can cause skin irritation and stomach cramps if ingested.

Those are the ones to watch for!

My flower garden was our pride - until my kids got to the cricket and footy stage. Those stray balls have killed too many plants, and now I'd like something more durable. Can I make an attractive garden out of plants that can handle a ball?

- Sports Mad

Dear Sports Mad,

I know all too well the tragedy of seeing all your hard work ground down to dirt! But don't lose hope - there are solutions.

Depending on your property, all it might take is a well maintained lawn and the right specimen tree. However, if the thought of a garden without many flowers seems too hard to bear, then it might be a case of buying plants that flower regularly and which don't have

vulnerable foliage.

Australia is blessed with a wide array of attractive native plants and many of these have developed qualities to help them thrive in their natural environment. Pick plants that can handle the knocks. Lightly pruning plants and shrubs will help maintain a compact and robust shape, making them less vulnerable. Grevilleas are known for their toughness, as are the attractive Callistemon (bottle brushes), which can add spectacular colour to any garden.

For smaller plantings, one option would be to plant grasses; these will not succumb as easily to the problems of breaking branches and soft spring foliage. Grasses come in many attractive colours and make for interesting borders or screens.

Need help with your garden? Ask Dominic! Email your questions to dominic@mc-news.com.au



Grevillea acanthifolia can cause rashes

Photo: Ian Sutton

Playtime in Melbourne

By Kate Tapping

There are literally thousands - yes, over 2000 - of playgrounds in Melbourne. How lucky are we? Criteria for selecting the 'best' playgrounds differ depending on the age of your children, where you live, and what your children like doing. Some of our favourites include:

Beach baby

Near the corner of Beaconsfield Parade and Victoria Street in Albert Park. Located next to the beach and with oodles of soft sand to play in, activities

at this playground involve scooping sand in buckets, hauling them high with ropes on pulleys and then pouring out the sand through pipes back to the bottom. And then starting all over again. The front of a pretend boat allows children to channel their inner pirate and let their imagination run loose. Great for a non-windy day.

City slickers

If you're city-bound, the Artplay Playground at Birrarung Marr is centrally located next to Federation Square, with lots of great sliding, swinging and climbing activities for children. Given its location, if you're

having a day out in the city it is a really handy place to bring the children to let off some steam. It's relatively large with no safety fence, so depending on your parenting style potentially a bit more hands on.

Nature lover

Perhaps not traditionally classified as a playground, the Children's Garden at the Royal Botanic Gardens is a haven for young explorers. Winding little paths, secret hideaways to discover and best of all, fountains to run through. You won't find no swings or slides here, but plenty to keep your little ones amused.



Life is a playground

Photo: Phalim Ooi / Creative Commons

Rainy days

Playgrounds are great for sunny, mild, windy, and even freezing cold days if you wear enough layers. But if it's rainy or over 30 degrees you really have to head inside. Scienceworks is a cheap and educational alternative to an inside playcentre. Upstairs 'Nitty Gritty Super City' caters for younger children in a safe, clean and fun environment,

while downstairs a rotation of different exhibitions throughout the year guarantees older children will never be bored.

Your closest playground

Location, location, location. There is a lot to be said for the playground at the end of your

road, or five minutes around the corner. If it's close, there is a coffee shop on the way, and chances are you'll run into other families you know, it sounds like a winner to me.

For more great playground ideas check out www.melbourneplaygrounds.com.au. Happy playing.