



Natural Play Environment - *at the Richard M. Guon Child Care Center*

The Natural Play Environments designed in 2010 for the Richard M. Guon Child Care Center were developed to renovate the existing playgrounds in order to create outdoor classrooms for active play. Our center philosophy values outdoor play. Research shows that young children's outdoor play and exposure to nature reduce the incidence of childhood obesity, attention deficit disorder and depression while creating opportunities for the development of intellectual, physical motor, and social-emotional skills.

The Richard M. Guon Child Care Center at Monroe Community College was built in 1991. In the spring of 2006, the center was informed that the playgrounds no longer met Consumer Product Safety Commission standards. With this information, and the knowledge that the playground's grading had shifted over the years and ground work needed to be done, the center staff began research on outdoor play environments for young children.

Central to the design of the new play environments are places for children to explore and discover nature on their own or with other children. Landscaping is crucial to the natural environment in our design by creating a place that changes over time and seasons. Buffer plantings are used to camouflage the wire fences, tall grasses to create "secret paths" and leaves that change color and fall to the ground in the autumn. Trees hold feeders and houses to attract birds. Shrubs attract butterflies and other wildlife for the children to observe and study.

Elements of the natural play environment are:

- Pine trees and flowering shrubs create a forest-like environment around playhouses where children can use their imagination while collecting pine cones and twigs.
- Flowering shrubs, perennials and ornamental grasses surround double slides that are set in the hills for use in all seasons. The landscaping provides seasonal color, fragrances and textures to stimulate children's senses and vocabulary.
- Tall ornamental grasses enclose secret paths that lead children through the outdoor area surrounding them with nature. Pathways of various surfaces, such as concrete for riding toys, garden bridges, and tunnels provide opportunities for children to exercise their large muscles.
- Grass under a tall tree makes a perfect spot to listen to musical instruments such as tuned drums, chimes, and xylophone, or for children to make their own music.
- Log-edged sandboxes and opportunities for water play provide sensory outlets and give children opportunities to practice math, science and coordination skills while pouring, counting, and mixing natural ingredients.
- The organic vegetable garden will be planted and tended by the children and student volunteers. Rain chains and barrels are attached to the sheds so children can fill watering cans.