

## Nature Playscapes

### River Oaks Park San Jose, California

River Oaks Park is a redwood and oak-studded landscape near the busy wildlife corridor of Coyote Creek. In 2011, The Acorn Group enhanced the park's tot lot with interpretive media that revolve around a simple interpretation of circadian rhythms.



We designed Nature's Clock—a large in-ground circular installation consisting of one set of large bronze medallions that symbolically depict one hour on a 12-hour clock and a second set of medallions, each a bas relief of an animal whose peak activity corresponds to a particular hour. As young children and their caregivers “walk around the clock,” they discover that some animals emerge and others retreat as the Sun rises or sets. A child-friendly interpretive panel accompanies the clock—its unique paper collages of a squirrel and raccoon reinforcing the message conveyed in the playful text.

### Inspiration Park San Jacinto, California

In 2010, The Acorn Group designed a six-acre nature trail system at Inspiration Park that incorporated four plant communities native to Southwest Riverside County: Diegan coastal sage scrub, southern willow scrub, cottonwood willow riparian forest, and oak woodland. Stories about these plant communities are interwoven with stories about the people and cultures that have called this region home.



Each small-scale vignette provides an immersion experience in which representative trees and shrubs are set amidst meandering pathways. The natural backdrop is accented with various fabricated, permanently installed artifacts that celebrate various aspects of the region's human history, inviting exploration and discovery in the process.

## Garvan Woodland Gardens Hot Springs, Arkansas

Garvan Woodland Gardens is a 210-acre botanical garden that encompasses a wooded oasis of naturalized gardens, rock formations, and streams and lakefront property. In 2009, The Acorn Group joined with Terra Design Studios to develop its interpretive master plan. This work included identifying interpretive media for both a children's garden and preschool discovery garden.

## Evans Adventure Garden



Families experience their first dramatic view of Evans Adventure Garden from atop a curving, treetop bridge. The bridge gently lowers visitors to enormous boulders that frame the walkways and stream that meander through this remarkable adventurescape. These boulders also create the nooks and crannies older children seek—mysterious caverns, waterfalls, and ledges that invite the curious. The Acorn Group identified low-profile panels, flip lids and flip books, inspirational verse, and other media for this garden. They suggest exploratory activities for older children without dashing spontaneous play.

## Preschool Discovery Garden

While older children set out to explore Evans Adventure Garden, younger children will be at home in the Preschool Discovery Garden. Designed specifically for toddlers

and preschoolers, this space beckons young explorers to engage in imaginary play among hidden toadstool rings, fairy houses, tree houses, and smooth logs and boulders. Here, the media focus on child-centered exploration and development of the basic skills of a naturalist. An orientation panel playfully welcomes young children and their caregivers and encourages their exploration and play. Other media, such as discovery carts and nature cue cards, direct hands-on investigations and offer suggestions for playful adult-child interactions, such as counting all the colors seen on one large rock or finding a plant that tickles.



**Octopus Garden**  
Fitzgerald Marine Reserve  
Half Moon Bay, California

As part of the interpretive master plan The Acorn Group developed for Fitzgerald Marine Reserve in 2004, we designed an interactive outdoor sculpture garden. Part interpretive tool and part playground, Octopus Garden beckons young visitors to explore and discover life in a tidepool. Larger than life sculpted and stained concrete animals, including colorful monkey-faced eels, ochre stars, and giant green anemones, are positioned in their correct intertidal zone and identified and briefly described on interpretive panels.



In addition to serving as a kinesthetic experience for younger children, the sculpture serves as an effective teaching tool for docents. Orientation to the reef takes place on the bluff, where the structural adaptations of fragile life forms can be pointed out and explored prior to reaching the delicate ecosystem below. To ensure safety and full access, playground matting encircles the entire structure.

**Nature Discovery Garden**  
West Coyote Hills  
Fullerton, California

Positioned between a nature center and 72-acre preserve, a proposed nature discovery garden will offer outdoor space for children to safely explore their world, enjoy new experiences, become familiar with local plant and animal life, and gently interact with nature in ways that are play-oriented and rich in experiential learning. Children enter the garden through a *torii*, a Japanese garden gate. Once inside the garden, they have multiple options for launching their explorations.



Native plant installations, nature-inspired play features, and art-inspired natural features offer numerous multisensory options. Water is a key element in the garden; its ability to attract children (and after-hours wildlife) cannot be overestimated. Parents or other accompanying adults are welcome in this garden. In fact, they are needed. The playscape offers such features as a tree house, willow tunnel, and shallow stream—places that encourage climbing, running, and getting wet. As families leave the garden, they can head off on trails through the preserve with their curiosity piqued for further discovery.

## Quail Hill Community Center Irvine, California

Two distinct audiences are served by the playscapes at Quail Hill Community Center: children ages 2-5 and children ages 5-12. Here, we created interpretive media that progresses in an age-successive manner, beginning with very young children whose Nature's Playscape area celebrates backyard discoveries. The media then advance to accommodate children ages 5-12 whose Adventure Play area challenges them move beyond the backyard and begin exploring local "wildness."

### Nature's Playscape (ages 2-5)

In Nature's Playscape, play equipment, landscaping, and interpretive media set a tone that encourages free exploration within the confines of a safe and secured play area. While verbal language cues are given by an accompanying adult, symbolic cues and exaggerated natural objects are presented directly to the child. Imaginative play in this unique outdoor environment provides a gentle introduction to the natural world of backyards and beyond.



Reflecting the *I Spy* venue, nature clues are hidden throughout the Playscape area. These include larger-than-life animals and animal sign, such as burrow, specimen plants and trees, and other features that are revealed as a small child peers through the cut-out portals of strategically positioned interpretive panels.



### Adventure Play Area (ages 5-12)

In the Adventure Play Area, play equipment, interpretive media, and fabricated paleontological specimens challenge older children whose intellectual skills and physical capabilities empower them to solve ecological mysteries. At a dig site, children search for buried fossils, like mammoth tusks and sloth skulls, and use fossil identification cards to identify them. They realize that these large mammals roamed Quail Hill during the Pleistocene Epoch.

