The parcels of woods and old fields that were used by many of us in our youth are no longer available to children or safe for outdoor play. Nature Explore Classrooms are part of a program sponsored by the Arbor Day Foundation and Dimensions Educational Research Foundation intended to provide many of the same kinds of hands-on interactions with nature that we enjoyed in our childhood.

These special classrooms are based on field-tested principles and include 10 recommended areas. The areas provide fun opportunities and include all learning styles so that the classroom contributes to the development of motor skills, imagination, observation, cooperation, and others. The 10 areas, each serving its specific research-based purpose, are an entry feature, open area, climbing/crawling site, building area, messy materials area, natural area, place for music and movement, garden or pathway through plantings, gathering place, and storage facility. Supplemental areas are suggested where space and local interest allow.

One of the great features of Nature Explore Classrooms is that they can be designed to fit any space or circumstance. A model classroom at Arbor Day Farm is only 3,400 square feet. Other small classrooms are located at child care centers, urban schools, and small parks. A Nature Explore Classroom is an excellent use of a small space to help young children discover the joy of outdoor play, the wonders of nature, and skills that lead to success in school and later in life. You can see many examples of different Certified Nature Explore Classrooms at natureexplore.org.

FOR MORE INFORMATION …

For helpful sources of information about Nature Explore or any other topic in this bulletin, please visit arborday.org/bulletins.

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Woodland forests and gardens are among the ways communities are making good use of small spaces.

A s open space in our communities becomes crowded with buildings, roads, and parking lots, the need to wisely use even the smallest of spaces grows more critical. Now is the time for innovation and vision to ensure that there will always be room for trees, flowers, and wild creatures and places to play, relax, or meditate. It is also the time for innovation to help us make good use of all areas to conserve water, save energy, and live sustainably.

When Mark Twain advised, “Buy land — they’re not making it anymore,” he had no idea how those words would be magnified in the 21st century. As the 1900s drew to a close, cities were spreading over the rural landscape at a rate of 2.2 million acres per year. The spread, of course, was and is fueled by more and more people. The world’s population doubled in less than 50 years, and in the United States, it went from 76 million people in 1900 to 281 million in 2000. In addition, the demand for natural resources per capita is rising, and as Mark Twain warned, space for all of this has remained the same.

Urban foresters and concerned citizens in many parts of the country are rising to the challenge of ensuring that trees and other natural components of our environment will not be crowded out of existence. Some have been planning this for a long time. For example, thanks to urban planning that began more than 100 years ago, Cook County, Illinois, has a system of protected land exceeding 6,000 acres, including 3,600 acres within the city limits of Chicago. These precious areas include a 90-acre prairie preserve so rich in natural diversity that if you tossed a hula hoop on the ground, it would encompass more than a dozen native plants. The areas decrease in size to the footprints of former buildings, which are now small parks, to narrow highway medians where colorful, durable varieties of plants soften the harsh landscape.

Officials in many other cities are becoming aware of the need to address the challenges of growing demands on a static land base. How this is done is limited only by imagination, leadership, and the will of the people. However, getting it done is essential to preserving the beauty and health of our communities.