



All expenses spared

*On a budget? When it comes to kitting out your outdoor area, it's good to be a Womble, says **Juno Hollyhock**...*

I VISITED A SCHOOL RECENTLY whose staff were looking for, amongst other things, a mud kitchen for their grounds. They had a lovely outside space with a nice natural feel to it: longer grass was intersected with winding, creatively cut pathways; fruit trees snuggled up against the edges softening the fence line, and there were lots of nice corners for den building and creative play. The school was clearly in the right frame of mind to be using their outside spaces and I was looking forward to helping them get under way.

There was a teacher who held the responsibility for using the outdoors and she was already well engaged with her forest school training. But apparently still we had a problem...

There was a little delegation of very worried people gathered around one of those small early years tables. We all shuffled our knees around trying not to turn the thing over

or nudge each other inappropriately and once we were settled, we got to the nub of the problem.

"You see, the thing is, we just can't afford it..." the teacher explained.

"What is it you're wanting?" I asked, eyeing a pile of colourful catalogues, stacked on the table, with some suspicion.

"Well, aside from the mud kitchen, we need a den-building kit, some water butts, cloches, plant pots and seed trays and a poly tunnel for the growing area, and some overalls for when the weather is a bit muddy. If we add it all up we're looking at a cost of at least £1,000 – even with our frequent flyer, super off peak, favourite customer discount..."

Let's leave it there. The truth is, if funds are really tight you don't need to spend a fortune on these things – a little bit of make do and mend, and good Wombing activity can yield all sorts of resources on a small budget. In this case, this is what we did:

For the mud kitchen, a small table was released from where it had been languishing under the gym equipment for years; painted nicely it was an excellent cooker. Bent spoons came from the server, and as pots and pans in children's homes became defunct, they found their way to the kitchen.

The kitchen space itself was created by the application of a hose and few small people in boots. It didn't take long to create a muddy mess.

Next the den-building kit. Tarpaulin offcuts came from the local chandlery (garden centres often have offcuts) and ropes

were released from the ends of reels at the local DIY store – let them know in good time so that they can put your name on the ends as they come up. To these were added old sheets and clothes pegs donated by parents. The local carpet retailer provided some lovely tiles for the internal furnishing (although these were soon requisitioned for stepping stones) and a few old OHP transparencies were found lurking suspiciously by a disused overhead projector, which made for lovely windows.

Finally, the growing area. A plea went out to parents and carers for supermarket mushroom containers for seed trays (just pierce a couple of holes); plastic drinks bottles for watering cans; cut off squash bottle tops for cloches; the bubble wrap from Amazon deliveries for the poly tunnel roof; toilet roll inners (this was a setting that allowed these) for biodegradable plant pots; old shirts for overalls; and the local authority was approached for any household refuse collection bins that could be converted into mobile water butts. The local allotment association provided some potting compost and plants, as well as onion sets and seed potatoes, and even delivered them and offered their help over the summer holidays to maintain the growing.

It only took a couple of weeks and the outdoor space was well under way and the only cost was a few starter strawberry plants to get them going. It's good to be a Womble...

LtL is a UK charity dedicated to enhancing outdoor learning and play for children. For services and resources for early years settings, visit ltl.org.uk

