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Color these treehouses green

Tyler Arboretum updates last year's popular exhibit

By *BETSY PRICE*
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MEDIA, Pa. -- If Tyler Arboretum's 2009 installment of Totally Terrific Treehouses has a centerpiece, it's Strummin' and Drummin', a magnificent structure that looks like a giant guitar laying on its side next to an equally giant drum.

The neck of the guitar stretches along a huge fallen Red Oak, hewn in half to support it. Kids dart inside the guitar body and drum, making music with shakers and more.

The spectacular surprise is halfway through the tour of this year's crop of treehouses.

Last year's event, which invited area artists and engineers to build treehouses that showed off the glory of the forest, was so successful that the arboretum brought it back with a twist: Each treehouse had to focus on ecology and demonstrate sustainability.

So, instead of a Three Little Pigs treehouse perched on a fallen tree, this year the Three Little Pigs Go Green: The straw house has a green roof and each inside wall is insulated with different natural renewable materials, such as recycled cotton made from denim or sunflower seed hulls, both waste products. The brick house has a solar panel on the roof, a rain barrel in the back and more natural insulation inside. The stick house has a clay tile roof and is painted pink inside with no-V.O.C. paint that doesn't give off gases.

Other treehouses, some of them recycled from last year, used wood found on the property, much of it already fallen down, or cut down because it was diseased or dangerous. Even Strummin' and Drummin' uses cast-off pieces of bark and wood as nifty fencing.

Ultimately, says Betsey Ney, director of public programs for Tyler, the idea behind the treehouse program is to reconnect children with nature.

"And this really does," she says.

The exhibit's second goal is to help engage children's imaginations and encourage free play, and it certainly does.

At the Three Pigs treehouse, an alarmed 2-year-old Georgie Doemling stops his grandfather, Jerry Doemling, from playing wolf with the straw house.

"He didn't want me to huff and puff because he was afraid it would fall down," Jerry says. He and his wife, Pat, brought Georgie with 7-year-old May and 8-year-old J.D.

At Imagination Station, one of last year's recycled three houses that features a sleek, modern entrance leading to a fireman's pole slide, the kids head straight to a Rubbermaid costume box. They start pulling out fairy wings, a turtle costume and more.

"This hasn't changed, except for the addition of the costume box," Ney says. The inside of the treehouse features a series of long, wide steps leading to a little enclosed space that seems like a stage.

"It's sort of like a natural amphitheater," she says. "Last year we noticed the parents would sit and the kids would be out there dancing around."

Now, they can be knights or cowboys or fairies or angels or lady bugs dancing around.

Sometimes, the ecology and sustainability messages aren't apparent.

A new treehouse, Tree Hugger -- and yes, everyone busts out laughing at the title because the triangular structure really does hug trees -- was built with less than one-third of a barrel of waste by Re:Vision Architecture, Janiczek and Philadelphia University students.

The students used salvaged wood they found on site and then milled the lumber on site to reduce carbon emissions from transportation. They spent hours walking around trying to find the right location, until they found one on the edge of a forest and meadow.

That treehouse is right around the bend from Backyard Memories, built by Horticultural Department volunteers from Tyler to look like the neighborhood clubhouse found in so many backyards. A shed -- covered with a green roof -- features old license plates and a deck to play on. The treehouse also has a winding steel staircase that leads to a lookout platform, deliberately made to wobble back and forth, just for that delicious fear factor.

Other treehouses include Badger Burrow, an open-air living room furnished with chairs, table and fireplace made of stumps and old logs; Bug Abode, which invites climbers to search for beneficial and destructive bugs; Thoreau's Workshop, a copy of the cabin built by Henry David Thoreau on Walden Pond; the Music Station; and the Bird Preserve, which features a human sized birdhouse from last year posted across from a forest of birdhouses for real birds.

Badger Burrow, named for a character in "The Wind in the Willows," sees a lot of pretend play, but not always in the name of Badger.

"Sometimes it's 'Narnia,' sometimes it's whatever cartoon is popular right now," Ney says.

But all of that pales to nature.

"Chipmunk!" one of the Doemling kids yells as a streak of brown and white dashes across the path and into shrubbery near Badger Burrow. For a moment, all action ceases and all eyes are focused on the fuzzy critter trying his best to hide.

As soon as he's out of sight, play resumes.

IF YOU GO

Totally Terrific Treehouses

WHERE: Tyler Arboretum, 515 Painter Road, Media, Pa.

WHEN: Now through Sept. 27; arboretum open weekdays from 9 a.m.-5 p.m.; weekends through Aug. 2, 9 a.m.-8 p.m.; weekends Aug. 3-Sept. 6, 9 a.m.-7p.m.; weekends Sept. 7-Sept. 27, 9 a.m.-6 p.m.

COST: \$7, adults; \$4, children; Under 3, free.

BONUS EVENTS: "Charlotte's Web" performance, July 19, 1-3 p.m.; Back-to-School Party, Aug. 23, 1-3 p.m.; Treehouse Treasures, Sept. 27, 1-3 p.m.

FOR MORE INFORMATION: (610) 566-9134; www.tylerarboretum.org
