

Simple Outdoor Classrooms to Make on a Shoestring Budget

1. Cable Spool Chic

Obtain six to eight free cable spools from your electric or phone company, to use as tables. Tip the spools onto a flat side and select those which are the right height for children to work at while standing (or choose shorter spools and make seats from 5-gallon buckets, often discarded at construction sites). Screw scrap pieces of pressure-treated lumber on the bottom surface of the spools as feet, to keep them from rotting. Sand the top surface and paint the whole thing with "oops" paint, available discounted or free from a home improvement store, because the color was mixed wrong. If the outdoor classroom is to be located in an open, sunny area, purchase a colorful beach umbrella for each table and insert in the spool's center hole. Warehouse clubs carry these 7 ft., tilt-top umbrellas for \$10 - \$15 each. Total cost of this outdoor classroom: less than \$100 (umbrellas and paint). Time to complete: less than one day.

2. Convertible Bench-Tables

Assemble six converting bench-tables, using your own 2 x 4 lumber (nine 8 ft lengths) with kits containing hardware and pre-fabricated legs. Arrange the benches in a semicircle for class discussions, or flip the bench-backs up and lock in place as table tops, on which students can write or conduct experiments. Total cost of this outdoor classroom: approximately \$50 per bench-table, or \$300 - \$400 per outdoor classroom. Time to complete: less than one day.

3. Weather Station

Install two or three pre-fabricated, six-foot sections of picket fence (available from any home improvement store) in a straight line or 'U' shape, and anchor in the ground with quick concrete, poured dry into the post holes. (Ground moisture will set the concrete). Attach large weather instruments such as a barometer, thermometer, and anemometer. Invite classes to make and add other instruments such as windsocks and pinwheels. Total cost: less than \$100. Time to complete: less than one day.

4. Portable "Anyplace" Outdoor Classrooms

Outdoor classrooms do not have to be structural. Consider the advantages of these simple approaches:

Rag Rug Retreat~ Obtain washable rag rugs from any dollar or discount store (one per child) and carry them outside to create an instant outdoor classroom, wherever you please. Need writing surfaces? Have each student use a clipboard. Cost for rag rugs: \$1- \$2 per child; approx. \$30 total.

Bucket Brigade~ Have each child bring in a 5 gallon bucket with a lid (often used in construction for paint or sheetrock mud). Remove the elastic cord from the underside of the lid, place a piece of foam on the top side of the lid, cover it with a colorful bandanna, wrap the bandanna over the edges of the lid, and secure the fabric underneath by replacing the elastic cord in its groove. Voila! Each student now has a container for carrying supplies, which doubles as a comfortable seat. Cost for the Bucket Brigade: approx. \$6 per child, unless buckets are donated by home improvement stores or scavenged from construction sites.

5. Other Types of Outdoor Classrooms Worth Considering...

Gazebos: Large pre-fabricated gazebos with bench seating for an entire class can often be delivered to your school on a flat bed truck, slid from the bed, rolled atop pvc pipes to a desired location, and leveraged into place. A little like building the Pyramids, this process is a veritable refresher course in simple machines! Cost: approximately \$3000 - \$6000 for a 9' x 12' model.

Amphitheaters: Permanently-mounted bench seating is the least flexible option for an outdoor classroom, but allows for large groups of children (perhaps a grade level or an entire school) to sit together for presentations.