

A Tree Swing in the Yard - A House Is Just a House Until It's a Home

Sometimes the simplest changes in our lives make the most difference. I was reminded of that about a year ago, not long after I'd moved with my kids from Manhattan to Joshua, Texas.

It was a difficult time for my family. My wife and I had separated, and she'd moved to the Fort Worth area to be near her sisters. She left with Madeleine, our 5-year old girl, and I stayed back in New York with our boys, Italo, 16, and Marco, 13.

We'd initially thought the separation would be short-term, but after some months my boys told me they thought otherwise, and that if I wanted the three kids back together we'd have to move to Texas. It would mean giving up the closeness of my family, my job as a magazine editor, my friends and the familiarity of my home.

I decided that having the boys back with their sister and near their mom was the most important consideration, so after a three day trial trip to look for homes—my boys picked one just south of Ft. Worth—we set off in a rental truck with our world packed in boxes.

We arrived and entered a period of adjustment: I was suddenly an out-of-work freelance writer at 50, the owner of a small house on an acre-and-a-half of yard dotted with lovely old sycamores, cedars, gnarly oaks and hackberrys, in a rural area where small ranches and farms dominated the landscape. It was bucolic but everything was new to us: I'd never even started an electric lawnmower, much less owned one, the neighbors didn't know what to make of us Yankees, and we had to work on turning our new house into a home. We hung our pictures and unpacked our books, found out where the local supermarket was and got the boys enrolled in the local high school. It was all made easier by having Madeleine nearby and with us a few days a week, but none of it quite did the trick.

And then one day, maybe two months after we moved in, Madeleine asked, "Dad, are we going to have any tree swings?"

I'd never thought about it but after a moment said, "Sure, if you want one we'll make one."

"Can we do it when I come back on Saturday?"

"You got it, kiddo."

It seemed like a simple enough request, but never having made a tree-swing before, I wasn't sure how to do it. I asked Italo and Marco what kind of swing we should make and they decided that a tire wouldn't do, that we should have a board-seat swing.

We'd been replacing rotting boards on a foot-bridge over a seasonal creek and that ran through our property, using water-resistant, heat treated 2" X 10" pine, so as we had that around we decided to go with that for a seat. For the length, we had Madeleine sit and open her arms as if she was holding on to the swing's ropes: 30 inches was a generous fit.

For stability we decided to go with a four-corner design: two ropes, each thrown over a tree branch, passed through holes we'd drill near the corners of the board and tied-off underneath. For rope, I thought nylon would be the strongest and most weather resistant, but when we told the attendant at the local ranch store what we were going to do with it he said that the nylon would stretch and that our swing would be sitting on the ground in no time. Instead, he suggested a 3/4 inch rolled cotton rope. "That will last, won't stretch, water won't hurt it, the bugs won't like it and it'll be soft to hold onto," he said. "Plus, it'll hold about 600 pounds, so you won't need to worry about it snapping any time soon."

By Saturday, when Madeleine arrived, we were ready. We asked her which tree we ought to put it on. "The chain tree, of course," she said without hesitation. The tree she'd picked was an old hackberry, maybe 40 feet tall. It had been hit by lightning at some point years earlier and the stout trunk had been split. The previous owner had double-wrapped a thick chain around the trunk about five feet above the split to keep it from falling, and the chain was now embedded deep with the trunk and the tree remained healthy and strong. It wasn't far from the house and because of that chain, was our favorite tree. Best of all, it had a good thick branch growing horizontally out from the trunk about 15 feet from the ground, perfect for a tree swing.

We drilled half-inch holes an inch inside each corner of the swing seat, then Italo scrambled up the tree and threw the ropes over the branch. Marco and Madeleine and I pulled as hard as we could to test the branch's strength: the branch hardly moved.

Confident it would hold him, Italo climbed out on the branch and notched the places where the rope would sit. He eliminated the bark without cutting into the wood, giving the ropes a good smooth surface to ride on, as well as a place to sit so that they wouldn't slide sideways.

While he did that, Marco and I taped the ends of the ropes tightly and forced them through the holes in the seat. We set the height so that a grownup could sit on the swing with their feet flat on the ground: for Madeleine it meant boosting herself up a bit, but she was growing fast.

We leveled the seat and tied large triple knots just beneath it, then stepped back: The 13' foot white cotton ropes almost glistened in the afternoon sun. The swing looked like it had been there forever.

Italo and I got on the seat to test the rope: perfect.

Then it was Madeleine's turn. We put her on and she grabbed the two ropes on either side of the swing, her little hands clutching them tightly as we gave her her first push. The swing began to mark an arc that grew greater with each ensuing push. Madeleine began to

laugh, her laughter trailing all the way from here to there and back again. "Higher! Higher!" she giggled, swinging back and forth, her long hair flying, until it seemed she might just take off. "That's enough! That's high enough!" she laughed, and we slowed her down.

"Well," I asked when she got off. "Does it work?"

"That's the greatest swing ever, dad!" she beamed. "Thanks for buying this house with that chain tree."

And that was it: our house was our home. And that swing has been used Madeleina and her friends, the boys and their friends, and even dad once in a while, ever since.

Sidebar: Nuts and bolts:

While the pleasure of making something as simple as a tree-swing for your kids is enormous, according to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, in 2003, nearly 65,000 people nationally were injured on swing sets. Not all of them were serious injuries, but to minimize potential problems and maximize your child's fun there are some important things to remember:

— Make certain that the limb you're putting the swing on is strong enough to hold not only your child's weight, but the weight of as many children as will clamber onto the swing when no adult is present.

— Make certain that the swing is far enough out on the limb that your child is in no danger of hitting the tree trunk while swinging, even if they decide to swing sideways.

— Check your rope's strength regularly and replace it as often as needed.

— When knotting the rope beneath the swing, make the knots at least double the size of the hole you've drilled to prevent them from slipping through the holes, allowing the swing seat to fall.

— According to Dr. Martin Eichelberger, Chief of Emergency Trauma and Burn Services at the Children's National Medical Center in Washington, D.C., for maximum safety, to soften the blow if your child should fall or jump off the swing while it's moving, a pit 12" deep should be dug along the entire arc of the swing, and filled with shredded rubber, fine sand or hardwood fiber mulch.

— Inform any neighbors who have young children that you've put up a tree swing, and that their kids will be welcome on it but ONLY in the presence of an adult. Make that rule hard and fast.

About the Author

Source: <http://petergormanarchive.com>