



How to build a tree house

When you were a child, you either had a tree house or you wanted one. **François Haasbroek** explains how to build one.

ILLUSTRATIONS **NICOLENE LOUW**

Every child should have a tree house. A place that's yours alone. Your mom can't tell you to tidy your tree house – it's not her jurisdiction. Right of admission reserved. If you want to escape kids from school, an irritating sibling or a strict parent, you simply pull up the rope ladder.

The rope ladder! It's the tree house equivalent of a draw bridge over a moat. I'm a bit of a tree house expert. Before

I was even of school-going age, my best friend and neighbour Willie van Tonder and I built a small platform in a tree. This platform turned into a decade-long construction project, resulting in a seven-storey tree house with running water, power, a fireplace and a lift.

Here's how you build a tree house.

Choose the right tree

The thing that gets in the way of most kids having their own tree house is

not a lack of will or a lack of building materials, but the lack of a suitable tree. It can't be any old tree, it has to be a tree-house tree.

The bigger, the better. You want a tree with potential for vertical and horizontal expansion, but there are a few other factors to keep in mind...

I grew up in Ladismith in the Little Karoo. One of the benefits of growing up in the rural parts of South Africa is that you have access to a big yard. Like many other houses in Ladismith, we had a front garden with a lawn and rose bushes, and a backyard with fruit trees, a cement irrigation dam and a vegetable garden.

The first tree that Willie and I chose for our tree-house project was a fig tree on my property. Although it had a thick trunk, there wasn't a lot of space in the canopy for the house. And each time one of us broke a twig, we'd be covered in white, sticky sap.

Next, we tried the bottlebrush tree in the front garden. It had strong, wide-spread branches – perfect for a platform, the foundation of your tree house. But a bottlebrush has rough bark. During the construction phase, you'll spend a lot of time clinging to branches: rough bark and soft skin don't go together. Even worse, however, were its red flowers that attracted swarms of bees.

We had to admit – there wasn't a suitable tree at my house. Willie's dad was the local dominee and it was on the sacred grounds of the parsonage next door that we found the right tree – a big syringa. Not only did it have enough room for our tree house, but the bark was smooth, the branches were strong and there were no other residents that wished us harm.

Building materials and tools

A childhood friend built a tree house on their smallholding outside Ladismith using reeds. *Reeds!* Let them bake in the sun for a few weeks and your floor will fall apart.

Anything less than a solid plank and you're looking for trouble. Usually you have to beg your dad to give you a few planks, but Willie and I struck it lucky.

It happened on the day we decided it would be exciting to go down the zipline one-handed. Willie went first. He started his descent with two hands on the steel pipe and let go with one hand when he was halfway down. He fell off almost immediately and ploughed into the pea patch.

We used to have a 3 m-high fence, but it was broken down when I was about five and the tarred poles were thrown into a heap in our backyard. We had enough building material to last us a lifetime.

You don't need a lot of tools, just a hammer and a saw. Anything more than that and you're just showing off.

Try to keep your costs low, but be prepared to invest some of your pocket money in your tree house. We might have begged and borrowed planks and tools, but over the years I spent a considerable chunk of my pocket money on nails. When we got our pocket money, Willie and I pooled our coins and headed to the small hardware shop opposite the town hall in Queen Street to buy four-inch steel nails, wrapped in brown paper.

Get backup

Building a tree house is a team sport. Someone has to pass you the plank and hold it in place. And when you put up the first cross beam, you need an extra pair of eyes to make sure everything is level. (These days I only use these skills when my wife asks me to hang a painting or a framed photo at home.)

It's great fun to see the tree house take shape; sharing the process with your best friend makes it even more rewarding.

But building also involves a lot of donkey work. This is where a younger sibling comes in...

Willie and I both have younger

brothers: Danie and Servaas respectively. We put them to work. The secret is to convince your brother that he has an equal stake in the project, because a happy assistant is a hardworking assistant. But when it comes to executive decisions, seniority trumps all – even though I'm only 10 months older than Servaas!

When you're in the canopy and you drop a nail, it's handy to have someone who can go pick it up. Thanks, Danie.

Salvage where you can

You'll be surprised by what you can do with discarded items found in your neighbour's backyard. We gave many such items a second life. The church was right behind our tree house. When they renovated the bathroom building, we used parts of the asbestos roof to make a fireplace in the tree house. In retrospect, it wasn't the smartest or healthiest decision, but it worked like a dream.

I once picked up a fishing net on the beach in Still Bay, which was used as a hammock for years.

We added a small crow's nest to the top of the tree. When you stood upright, you could see over the canopy. We installed a 25-litre plastic container and filled it with water – you don't need a pump to have running water in your tree house because gravity will do all the hard work.

Getting access to power was also easy. We "borrowed" the extension cord from my dad's camping crate and used the plug in the garage. Not only did we have power for a work light, but also for our tape deck when the batteries ran flat.

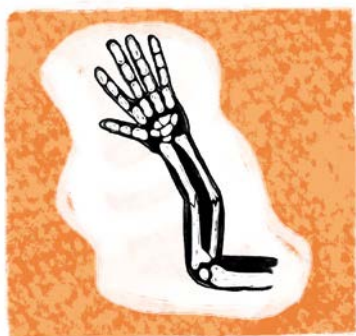
One autumn, our gardener raked all the leaves and put them in old grain bags. Tie five of these heavy bags to one end of a rope and a piece of wood to the other, throw the rope over a thick branch, and voilà, you have a lift with a counterweight to deliver you gently to the ground.

But the thing that really set a tree house apart in those years was a foefie slide. For our first attempt, we strung a ski rope between the tree house and a nearby pear tree, with a 30 cm-long piece of black plastic irrigation pipe to hold onto. Unfortunately, the friction caused

the pipe to melt. Also, our zipline was too slow. We wanted speed.

We got our hands on some steel wire, folded it double and tied one end to the tree house. The wire stretched over the vegetable garden and cement dam to the fence of the parsonage about 30m away.

Before we secured the wire, we covered it with grease and threaded it through a steel pipe to hold on to. Success!



Keep a first aid kit in easy reach

One day, I was busy hammering a beam into place on a platform about halfway up the tree when I saw something fall from the corner of my eye. Willie was higher up in the branches, sawing something, and I looked up to tell him to be more careful with his tools. But where Willie was before, there was now only a saw.

Willie was on the ground, groaning in pain. You would expect an ear-splitting scream when someone falls out of a tree, but personal experience has taught me that the ordeal takes place in silence. There's only the rustle of leaves and the snapping of twigs. Lucky for Willie, the canopy was dense and there were many small branches to break his fall on the way down.

All of us – Willie, our two brothers and I – fell from the tree at least once. Most of us multiple times.

Other injuries are also common: smacking your fingers with a hammer, getting splinters, skinning your knees, getting stung by a bee... But these could usually be treated with a plaster, or Mercurochrome if it was more serious.

All except one.

It happened on the day we decided it would be exciting to go down the zipline one-handed. Willie went first. He started his descent with two hands on the steel pipe and let go with one hand when he was halfway down. He fell off almost immediately and ploughed into the pea patch. He lost some skin but was otherwise fine.

I was next, and I planned to employ the same technique. (Why? After I had just watched Willie fall so spectacularly!) The problem is this: As soon as you remove one hand from the pipe, the

pipe twists on the cable and your other hand slips off. Doof! More mushy peas... Like Willie, though, the only thing hurt was my pride.

Time for Servaas to have a go. He tried a different approach – he *started* with one hand. The pipe had barely slid a metre when he fell: three storeys with nothing to break his fall but his arm...

While my dad drove the 160km to the hospital in George with Servaas on the back seat, Willie and I watched as his dad climbed the tree with a pair of wire cutters.

Planning is everything

Why isn't this the very first step? Because it's the least important. It's good to have a rough idea of what you want to do, but you have to be flexible. Let the tree talk to you. The most crucial thing to know about the planning stage is that it will never end, because your tree house will never be finished.

There were times that we thought our tree house was "done". After school, we would all gather in the tree house and we even slept there a few nights. But before long we looked at each other and wondered what was next. We removed planks, pulled up nails (and straightened them with a brick if required) then started anew because building a tree house is much more fun than using it.

Willie's family eventually moved out of the parsonage. We moved, too. Every time I drive through Ladismith now, I take a detour past our old house. Last time I was there, I looked up Willie's old driveway and I saw the syringa tree I spent so many hours of my childhood in had been cut down.

Maybe the branches were too close to the power lines, maybe the roots were lifting up the foundation of the house, maybe the tree was diseased. I don't know, but I'm sure there were still tarred poles nailed to its branches when it was felled.

I often think about that tree stump, a monument to my childhood.

Every child should have a tree house. My daughter Essie is a year old and I already have my eye on a rose apple tree in the back garden...