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The Ultimate ESCAPE

Local builders take treehouses to new heights.

by Ronni Wilde, for The Bulletin Special Projects / Photos by Kevin Prieto

For most of us, the word “treehouse” conjures an image of a piece of wood wedged between the branches of a tree, with a few two-by-fours nailed to the trunk serving as a ladder. Our mental picture might even include a “Keep Out” or “No Girls Allowed” sign tacked loosely onto the tree.

Treehouses of today, however, can be elaborate, artistic dwellings that are structural masterpieces, with engineering rivaling anything found in a traditional home.

The growing popularity of these little treetop homes certainly is due in part to the TV series “Treehouse Masters,” which features over-the-top treehouse designs. But builders and owners agree that the emerging fascination with treehouses is also an effort on all our parts to escape technology and get back to nature.

“If you’ve ever climbed a tree and hung out up there, it’s a whole other world,” said Bill Sturm, owner and lead craftsman of Oregon Timberworks. “It’s like camping in a way; it puts you closer to nature. We’ve removed ourselves from nature, but now we are looking for ways to get back to it.”

For some, having a treehouse is a way of revisiting childhood joy, or perhaps providing a way for our children to experience that joy.

“I grew up with ‘Swiss Family Robinson,’” said Sturm. “Who doesn’t want to live in a tree?”

Mike Christy and Janet Russell, who moved here from Los Angeles seven years ago, are long-time treehouse lovers, and built one on their property in Deschutes River Woods that is so ex-

travagant they rent it out on Airbnb.

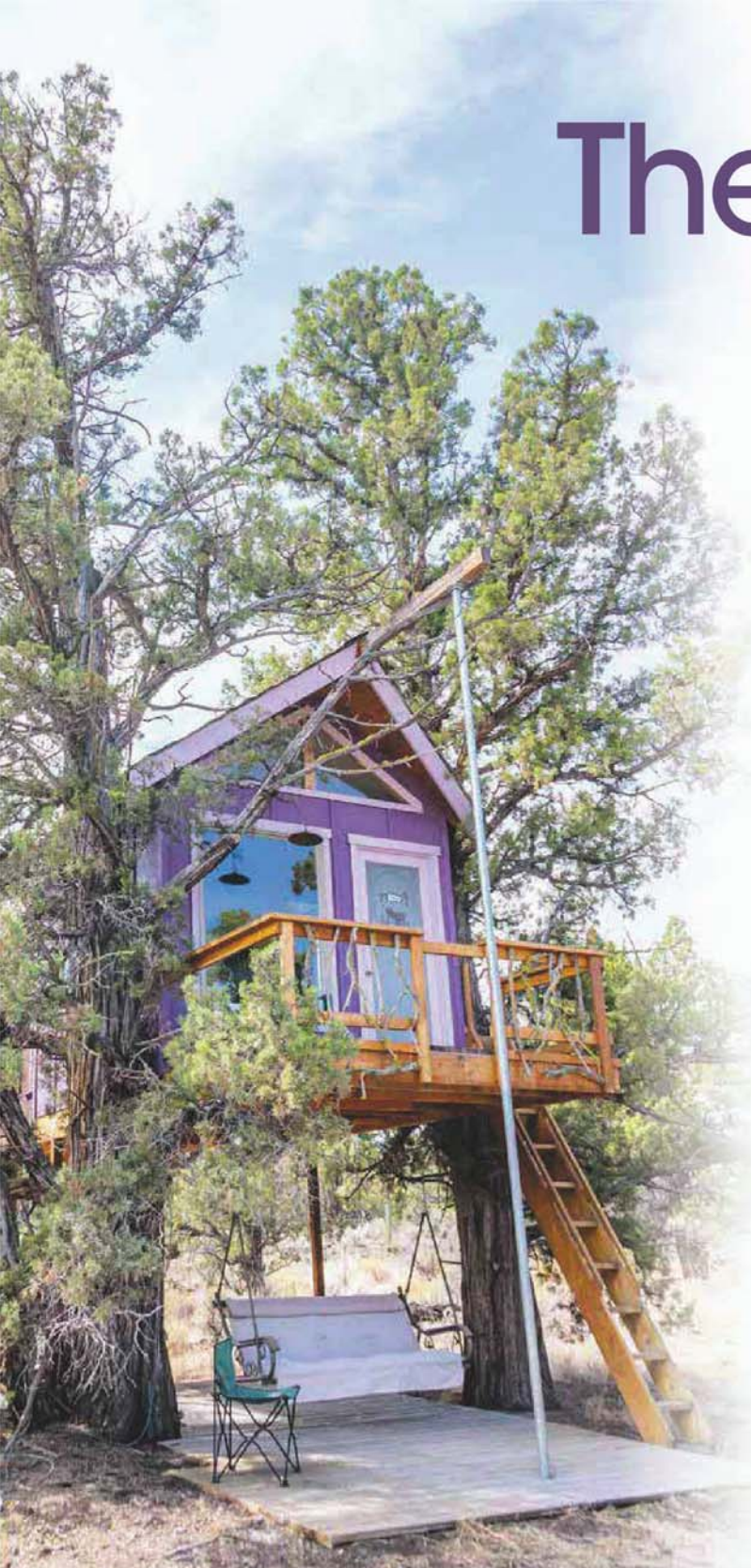
“We had a large lot in L.A. full of large trees, so I had four treehouses on the property, all home-built Tom Sawyer-style,” said Christy. When the couple moved to Oregon, Christy said he wanted another tree house, and set out to build it himself. He had more money to spend on this one, so he hired a shed builder to build the structure and do the big-lumber, heavy-lifting part of the work.

“It was more economical to hire a shed builder,” he said. “It’s basically a shed on a deck, and then you add the rest.” After his platform had been built, he and his wife finished the job, and continue to add upgrades.

“We didn’t know how much we would use it. Then we discovered Airbnb online at the beginning of this year, so we’ve been renting it out ever since,” he said. In doing so, Christy said they have made a substantial amount of money, enough to completely cover the cost of building the tree house.

Recently, with the money they have made from the rent, they added a high deck with a “swinging bed” that Christy said is very popular with his guests. The queen-size bed is an air mattress on a frame supported by chains from the rafters so that it swings. His 10-by-10 treehouse also has a full-size air mattress inside, electricity, an old radio and a new television. Outside, under the treehouse, there is access to a composting toilet, a shower with hot water and a small kitchen/cooking area with a propane stove.

“People like to sleep outside on the deck,” he said, adding that the sound





of a nearby brook adds to the back-to-nature appeal. The treehouse has become so popular, in fact, that it is now booked a month out. Christy and Russell are so pleased with their treehouse that plans are being drawn to build another treehouse on a nearby vacant lot they own. Their original shed builder is no longer in business, so the contractor who built their primary home is drawing the plans for the new treehouse. Christy said they will most likely rent that one out too.

Christy and Russell aren't the only ones renting out a treehouse in Oregon. In Cave Junction, located in Southern Oregon, there are two treehouse hotels. One, Out 'n' About Treesort, has 15 themed treehouses ranging in size, design, amenities, distance from the ground and price. The other, Vertical Horizons Bed and Breakfast, has three treehouses, each with a unique design, and one with a claw foot bathtub 45 feet off the ground.

"Treehouses are not what they used to be, when we nailed boards to trees," said Sturm. "Those treehouses only lasted a summer or so, and they weren't good for the trees."

Sturm, who has taken classes on treehouse building and custom built a fancy one for a client in West Salem, said there are several ways to go about building a treehouse. The structure can be wrapped around one tree, attached to a tree or multiple trees, or it can be built on a raised platform between the trees. Sturm said his preferred method is building a treehouse between two trees.

Whatever method is chosen, Sturm, who is in the preliminary stages of custom designing a treehouse for a client in Bend, said the most important element to

a successful, long-lasting treehouse is a secure, well-engineered platform.

"Once the platform is built, the sky's the limit," he said. "A treehouse can have all the same amenities as a home, with fireplaces, power, water and bathrooms."

Another safety precaution that must be considered when building a treehouse, said Sturm, is the health of the trees.

"You want to know the tree is in good shape. An arborist should determine the health of the trees. If needed, you can use artificial limbs to anchor the structure into the tree. Being a builder, my concern is structural," he said, adding that wind and weather in Oregon can cause a treehouse to take a beating.

"There's lots of maintenance required for a treehouse. It's super expensive, and can cost as much as owning a home. There's lots of liability for a builder," he said, adding that he has seen a 350- to 400-square-foot treehouse cost \$250,000 to construct.

Though treehouses can be expensive — particularly if they are built to be lived in — there are ways to keep the project affordable. Gordon Clowers, owner of Clowers Carpentry, Inc., built a treehouse in his backyard on the east side of Bend for less than \$3,000 in material costs.

"I repurpose materials whenever I can, and only buy new when I have to," he said. "But I have as much as 150 hours of work in it." As a general contractor who builds custom homes and barns throughout Central Oregon, Clowers had the know-how to design and build his 220-square-foot treehouse himself, using leftover materials from building projects and "bone yard" supplies from his vendors. The tin metal roof on his tree house



came from a rancher in Antelope, and the fireman's pole used to slide down from the 60-square-foot deck to the ground is from a plumbing supplier. The windows came from a vendor's leftovers and cost less than \$200 for all of them. The electricity that powers the television, lights and gas fireplace comes from a long extension cord running from the Clowers' main house, and lighting is provided by solar rope lights strung inside and out.

Clowers said he has always dreamed of building unique, interesting structures, even as a teenager. The idea to build a treehouse for his 9-year-old daughter first came to him when they owned a home on 1.3 acres in town, he said. When they moved out to their 10-acre site in the country near the Bend Airport, he said he spotted the perfect trees to make his dream come alive.

"I got out here and saw two trees that were the perfect distance from each other. They are junipers, which are very stable, so I attached the structure right to the trees because I don't have much sway." Even with 40- to 50-mile-per-hour gusts, he said the treehouse doesn't move at all. His advice to those considering building a treehouse is the same as Sturm's: safety first.

"Research how you are going to attach it. That's a huge factor. I would never have built in tall pine trees the same way I built in the junipers," he said. "You have to have a good game plan before you begin in order to prevent having to rebuild it later. You have to be safe when building anything off the ground."

Since the initial treehouse was built three years ago, Clowers is adding onto it in stages. He added a room on the south

side of the original structure, and extended a ridge beam out from the front to keep the fire pole stable. He also added a spring-loaded gate on the deck in front of the pole as a safety measure so that only one person at a time can exit to slide down the pole. A porch swing and chairs complete the deck beneath the treehouse.

He is currently putting finishing touches on the interior, insulating the walls and adding paint, wainscoting, trim work and curtains. He also hopes to install a Dutch door and to add to the fun, a zip line running down from the treehouse.

"Once it's all trimmed out, it's going to be really cute," he said. "It will be a completely finished structure."

Although the Clowers treehouse is still evolving, he said his family is thoroughly enjoying their little haven with a bird's-eye view.

"We take popcorn and a movie out there and go hang out and relax inside. We have slept out there four or five times this summer. We can stay warm in there even if it's only 38 or 40 degrees outside." He added, "My daughter is at that age where she uses it with friends or with me, but into her teen years, I think she'll spend more time out there doing homework, watching movies or having sleepovers."

Clowers said he agrees that treehouses are becoming more popular because people need an escape.

"People love quirky fun," he said. "Today's world is so chaotic and busy and fast-paced. It's fun to be creative. When you draw a picture in your head and then go out and build it, that's really fun."

