

# WELCOME HOME

*Magazine*

GREATER KALAMAZOO HOME IDEA GUIDE & LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE

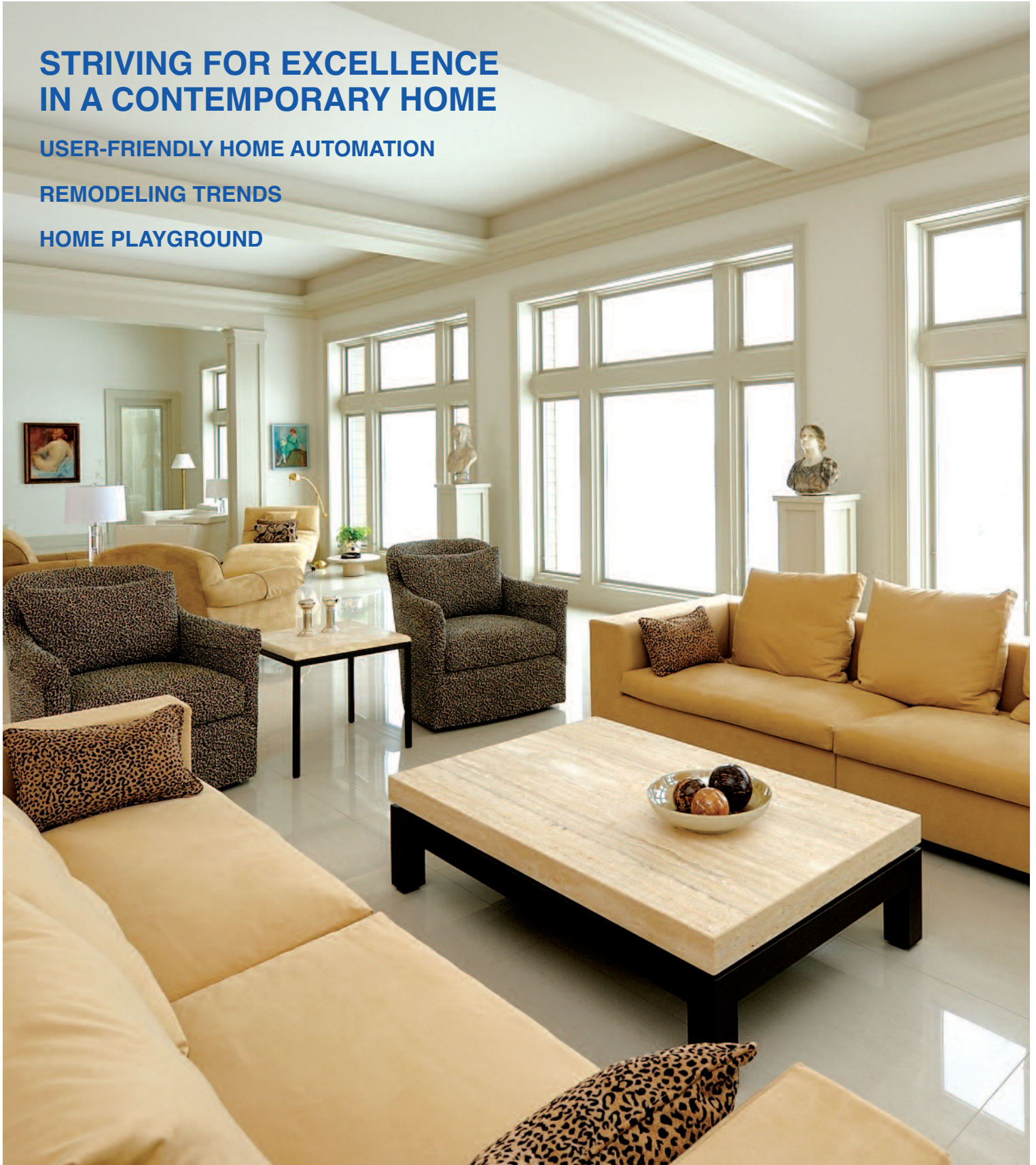
SPRING 2013

## STRIVING FOR EXCELLENCE IN A CONTEMPORARY HOME

USER-FRIENDLY HOME AUTOMATION

REMODELING TRENDS

HOME PLAYGROUND







*Photo courtesy of Bell Tower Outdoor Living Co.*

# Make Your Yard the Kid Hub of the Neighborhood

By Kaye Bennett

When it comes to backyard fun, the sky is, literally and figuratively, the limit. Jack Kosin is the owner of Bell Tower Outdoor Living Company in Richland, which carries basketball hoops and backboards, trampolines, and what (for want of a better phrase) we'll call "swing sets," though today's are a far cry from the simple backyard swings of old.

Bell Tower, says Kosin, handles products from Backyard Adventures, whose play sets are made of cedar and designed to be sturdy enough and tall enough so that parents and children can play together on them. Some sets are aimed at children who like to climb, while others have a tree house section that appeals to the secret-clubhouse yearnings of youngsters. Prices for a basic structure start about \$2250.

Whatever you choose, it's important to buy equipment from a dealer who handles products made by a certified manufacturer. Kosin recommends this because of the lifetime warranties on the products. Deb Carpenter, Childhood Injury Prevention coordinator at Bronson Children's Hospital and Safe Kids Kalamazoo County, agrees, but Carpenter looks at it from a safety standpoint.

Carpenter says that, according to the National Program for Playground Safety, more than 218,000 preschool and elementary children a year receive emergency department care for injuries that occur on playground equipment; 19 percent of these injuries happen on home play sets.

The most common type of playground injuries, says Carpenter, are falls. But the number-one cause of deaths is strangulation, which has led Safe Kids to stress that kids need to remove bicycle helmets before getting onto playground equipment and never to throw jump ropes or dog leashes or any other kind of rope over play structures. Drawstrings in clothing (such as hoodies) can also pose a danger, according to Safe Kids.

To prevent injury, Carpenter says, federal safety guidelines should always be followed. Equipment needs to be solidly anchored to the ground and footings must not be exposed for children to trip over or bump into. Hardware must be kid-safe, and there should be no gaps between components that can trap

youngsters. Certified manufacturers and professional installers strictly adhere to these guidelines, but a dad or granddad – no matter how skilled a woodworker he may be – probably does not.

Another safety consideration, says Carpenter, is the surface below the equipment. By law, public parks need to have a minimum depth of 12 inches of mulch, in order to provide wheelchair accessibility, as well as reducing the impact of falls. The Consumer Products Safety Commission (CPSC) estimates that only 9 percent of home playgrounds have proper surfacing.

Dan Glas, owner of Kalamazoo Landscape Supplies, knows something about lawn surfaces. Home owners should shoot for a minimum surface depth of six inches of mulch in play areas, he says, but more is always better. Three types of materials are most commonly used in home playground areas, Glas says: a special playground mulch made from clean ground wood; pea gravel; and washed sand. Prices for each type are similar, ranging from \$22 to \$25 per cubic yard, and each material poses some challenges. Pea gravel migrates or gets kicked into grass near the play area, making mowing a



Playground mulch is commonly used under playground equipment to reduce the impact of falls.

*Photo courtesy of Kalamazoo Landscape Supplies*



problem. Sand (the kids' favorite) is seen by neighborhood cats as one big, inviting litter box. Even playground mulch (the only choice that meets government regulations for public playgrounds) has a downside: While it is cleaner than other yard mulches, it's still a natural wood product, so it decays and gets dirty over time: New layers will need to be added and children will need to be washed.

And then there's grass. Kosin estimates that 75 percent of his customers have equipment installed directly over existing grass. Glas says that, if the play area gets a lot of activity, grass may be hard to maintain, but he adds that, when the kids grow up and the play structure finds a new home, grass is the easiest surface to reintegrate into the yard. Safe Kids points out that grass doesn't lessen the impact of falls.

Jack Kosin says that, while all playground equipment made by certified manufacturers is safe, all decisions made by homeowners may not be. Placement, he says, is crucial. The Bell Tower installation crew is familiar with safety recommendations and makes sure to follow all guidelines, such as providing a safe run-out distance at the bottom of slides, removing low-lying branches near swings, and placing trampolines on completely flat surfaces. Bell Tower customers can install their own sets, but they need to be aware of all such safety considerations. They should also plan to have a lot of time: What takes professionals a few hours to install, says Kosin, is likely to take the homeowner days. Each year Bell Tower offers a "Swing into Spring Sale," featuring a \$1 installation fee for homeowners who put a deposit down on a Backyard Adventures play set or a jump sport trampoline by April 1.

Families may question whether the number of years a top-quality play set will get used can justify the expense. Kosin says that today's structures are designed to appeal to an ever-expanding age group. "Toddler buckets" allow children as




*Photo courtesy of Bell Tower Outdoor Living Co.*

young as two years old to swing, while lofts and other high-rise components appeal to kids into their early teens, and trampolines have no upper age limit at all. (Note: Safe Kids recommends separate play areas for children under age 5.)

Kosin says that many families relocating from one house or state to another choose to have their backyard play set taken down, loaded onto the moving van, then re-installed in their new back yard. When their youngest finally outgrows the set, many families find a new home for the equipment on Craig's List, while others just leave it in place, awaiting eventual grandchildren.

Maintenance of modern wooden play structures is simple, says Kosin. The cedar should be stained every season or every other season. Backyard Adventures recommends periodically tightening all nuts and bolts.

Deb Carpenter says that families considering buying play equipment should refer to the CPSC's handbook on home playground safety. To learn more, visit [www.cpsc.gov](http://www.cpsc.gov). 

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