

fleeting beauty

CLUSTERS OF EARLY
SUMMER LILACS ADD
SOFTNESS AND SPARKLE
TO THIS BUCOLIC
ONTARIO COTTAGE

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A sprawling, colourful floral pattern on pillows and a chair, and daybeds draped in vintage white fabrics create cottage style charm in the rustic bunkie. The soft pink tones of an antique quilt quietly pick up on the lilac theme.



It was simple and solidly built,

the abandoned 1830s house in eastern Ontario's historic Prince Edward County, and when Susan Richardson decided it would make a perfect country getaway for her grown, city-bound children, she had a picture in her mind: the little house overflowing with family for summer and winter holidays, friends gathered in the kitchen, the sound of grandkids' laughter inside and out. The retired director of Park Design and Development for the City of Toronto also had a more specific vision for the house: it involved uncluttered rooms, light-filled spaces, soothingly neutral colours and fabrics that allowed the views of field and sky from every window to dominate. Susan's daughter, Sarah, a furniture and interior designer and host of the television show *Design Inc.*, who collaborated on the home's restoration, shares her mother's philosophy of country houses: "The goal is to connect to the view

ABOVE The original, square core of the cottage was probably built in the 1830s; a large wing and this covered verandah were added around 1870. The formerly dark green facade was treated to the same soothing tones used inside: linen-beige on the siding, putty white for the pillars and door trim in khaki.





DECORATE WITH LILACS

Prince Edward County, Ontario, is known for its lilacs. "You can drive down heritage roads here that are lined with massive, old lilac hedges," Susan says. Here are some of her favourite ways to enjoy them.

BE BOUNTIFUL, if you can; for once, less isn't more. "I bring in huge armfuls, and I always put a big arrangement at the front door."

LILAC SEASON IS FLEETING — usually from mid May to early June — so enjoy it while it lasts. Susan trims lilac stems and mashes them so the fibres drink in lots of water. "Remember, it's a shrub, not a flower," she advises.

DOUBLE THE IMPACT by placing lilacs in front of a mirror.

DON'T PUT LILACS on the dining table, as their tiny florets tend to fall.

A photograph of a bright, airy living room. In the foreground, a light-colored wooden coffee table with a grey top holds a white pitcher filled with purple flowers, a small glass bottle, and a white teacup on a patterned tray. To the right, a stack of books sits on the table. In the background, a white sofa with several pillows is visible. To the left, a wooden side table holds a lamp and a vase of purple flowers. A framed picture hangs on the wall. The room has light-colored walls, wooden floors, and large windows with light-colored curtains.

“The country house is now much more sophisticated than it was”

KNOW YOUR LILACS

Stretch the short lilac season by growing varieties that flower at different times.

There are **NO NATIVE LILAC SPECIES** in North America. The familiar common lilac (*Syringa vulgaris*) was first brought here by early European immigrants.

HYACINTH LILACS FLOWER EARLY (around mid-May) and have highly fragrant single or double flowers.

PRESTON LILACS, named for Isabella Preston, who developed them in 1920 at the Central Experimental Farm in Ottawa, are late-blooming (around mid-June) and bred to survive Canada's cold climate.

ASIAN TREE LILACS may grow up to eight metres tall. They are late bloomers (early July), with creamy white flowers.



OPPOSITE Susan put in a new floor of 12-inch-wide planks made from old barnboard; she likes the "soft, buttery look" of the pine. Sarah and Susan both vouch for the practicality of wash-and-wear white cotton slipcovers, which bring a bright, cheerful look to a country living room. Paired with neutral-toned drapes and cushions against the parchment-toned walls, the result is an expanse of pale-coloured surfaces that bounce the maximum amount of light around the room. A soft blue painted top is a playful touch on the old, Shaker-style coffee table that works well with the lilacs' mix of pale pink and deep magenta.

LEFT The Victorian-era dining table, with chamfered legs turned just at the tops, likely dates to the 1880s. A couple of lilac branches are placed in front of an antique mirror to magnify their presence.

and the environment, not to get bogged down by the decorative elements. You want to be able to look beyond that."

Susan and Sarah played up the home's natural attributes by painting the rooms in varying shades of white — there are more than 10 throughout the house, and even the wall and ceiling whites differ from each other. "They're chalk white, ivory, oyster, sand..." Sarah lists them. "It depends on the light. North-facing rooms need warmer whites, for instance, while west-facing rooms should have a less-yellow white, so it doesn't end up looking like buttercup."

By grounding the home's fundamentals in a palette of creamy neutrals, the two created a setting that was easily adaptable to both summer and winter decorating. "We used linen for the curtains, white cotton for the slipcovers," Susan says. "Sarah loves pale colours, natural colours." When







10 BEST WHITES

Designer Sarah Richardson created subtle differences in these rooms with these 10 shades of white.

1. Meeting House, Glidden
2. Natural White, Glidden
3. Antique White, Behr
4. French White, Glidden
5. Oyster Bay, Glidden
6. Ancestral White, Pratt & Lambert
7. Phantom, Pratt & Lambert
8. Balsa, Pratt & Lambert
9. Stormy Sea, Pratt & Lambert
10. Cottage White, Behr



LEFT A centrally placed kitchen island eases traffic flow and offers a great vantage point: "The cook gets the view," Sarah says. "You can watch the sunset from there." When they brought home the barnboard planks for the floor, mother and daughter discovered they had a mix of pine and hemlock, so they put the harder hemlock in the kitchen, where it will stand up to a lot of use.

ABOVE "I like long stretches of cabinetry and counter and open shelves," Sarah says. "They're useful in a country home where there are often friends or house guests using the kitchen." Unmatched shelf brackets have an idiosyncratic charm. A coat of crisp white on the once blue wainscoting helped to visually open up the space. A spray of lilacs in an old glass bottle adds intoxicating scent and a dash of soft colour.

*“The goal is to connect to the view
and the environment”*



spring arrived, blankets and heavy throws in rich, dark red, ochre and indigo blue were tucked away. Rugs were rolled up and the floors left bare, and linen-covered pillows and Susan's favourite lightweight vintage quilts in soft, faded blues, pinks and greens took their place. "It's unexpected," Sarah says. "The house became light, fresher, more open." It was also a picture-perfect backdrop, for a few weeks in May and June, for a display of armloads and bucketfuls of Prince Edward County's abundant lilacs — in sweetly complementary shades from creamy white, lavender and soft pink to deep magenta and royal purple.

Susan, who loved the new serenity of the house, notes also that the look is endlessly flexible. "The country house is now much more sophisticated than it once was," she says. "You can dress it up, with good antiques, or down, with rustic painted furniture. You don't have to be afraid to bring in crystal, candles, favourite antiques." Or lilacs.



In the end, the story of the house came to a turn in the road. Susan's children found they couldn't spend much time at the country place, and it became impractical for her to keep it. So, the house now has new owners, but neither Susan nor Sarah have any regrets. Says Sarah: "It was a happy process — taking a really old house and turning it into a cozy, calming place. And we like knowing there's a new young family living in it who love it as much as we did." ●

What makes this house cottage style?

- Sunbleached floral patterns
- Slipcovered chairs
- Pale colour palette
- Beadboard walls
- Covered porch with Muskoka chairs
- Painted floorboards
- Vintage accessories
- Fresh flowers in milk glass containers
- Chenille bedspreads
- Open shelves in the kitchen
- Colourful rag rugs
- Lightweight antique quilts



OPPOSITE In a tiny bedroom, many of Susan and Sarah's favourite country-home elements come together: soft-toned quilts and pillow covers, fringed chenille bedspread, an old iron table with a chipped-paint finish that has become satiny with age, and vintage barkcloth curtains in hyacinth blue that have been faded and softened by the sun.

ABOVE The marble basin, Victorian-style faucet and antique mirror form a nostalgia-tinged vignette enhanced by a single deep pink lilac blossom.

LEFT The classic farmhouse character of the bathroom's refurbished clawfoot tub and wainscoting needed little embellishment. "We played with a white and khaki colour combination," Susan says. They put grey-green slate tiles on the floor. The painted wood cabinet is European.