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ANNUAL MAGNETISM

A powerful, personal spell draws the family and friends of a Maine decorator and her husband back to the couple's seaside guest cottage summer after summer

BY MARTIN FILLER PHOTOGRAPHY BY WILLIAM WALDRON PRODUCED BY SARAH KALTMAN CANTOR

Where does decorating end and life begin? That question is particularly hard for professional designers to answer: Many find the impulse to keep doing things to their own homes can become a chronic preoccupation. But to Mallory Marshall the guesthouse she and her husband, Peter Haffenreffer, own on the coast at Sabbathday Harbor is no work and all play. "Everything in this house is extremely sentimental," Marshall (partner with James Light in the Portland, Maine, interior design firm Mallory James) explains of the white clapboard turn-of-the-century cottage they bought to put up visitors. "It's not a decorator's house. It's the place where the things you really love and the people you really love all fit in."

But that doesn't mean she wants to see either group all the time. In what might be a local long-distance record, the Marshall-Haffenreffer guesthouse in Pripet is eleven miles from their main vacation residence at Dark Harbor on the other side of Islesboro Island. "The reasons people go down and stay at the guesthouse," says Marshall, "are because they're madly in love with it, or they're with us for longer than four days, or we're having one of our massive everyone-up-at-the-same-time days."

Ask most other decorators about guest rooms and you are likely to hear a good deal about sumptuous creature comforts such as inch-thick towels, lace-trimmed sheets, and crystal bedside canafes. But Mallory Marshall has her own list of guesthouse luxuries.

"The cottage has everything you need," she enumerates: "Water views in two directions. A huge swing outside so no matter which way you sit you're swinging toward the water. It has a beautiful garden that anyone can plant anything in and not get into trouble. It has neighbors you can borrow an egg from when you don't have one. It has a heavenly outdoor



Overlooking Sabbathday Harbor at Islesboro, Maine (top), a turn-of-the-century cottage (above) is now a private guesthouse. Opposite: An Empire-style chair is ready to rock in front of a "maggied" console table and cupboard.

shower and a monster bathtub upstairs. And hanging in the Blue Bedroom is a basket filled with illicit candy bars you're never allowed to eat in real life."

Such is Marshall's emphasis on the human over the aesthetic that she fails to emphasize the authenticity she and her partner, James Light, bestowed on every room of her guesthouse. Here the milky, rustic aura that calls out to consumers from the pages of a hundred mail-order catalogs is the real thing. Furniture that came with the house, descended in the family, or was acquired at country auctions for next to nothing provides the context for beloved mementos and casual discoveries. Everywhere are signs of Yankee practicality that would have appealed to the island's most famous decorator, the legendary Sister Parish. Windows in the guesthouse dining room are hung with a grape-pattern chintz rejected by a client.

Lest guests forget where they are, there is much local memorabilia to remind them. A painting of the Maine poet May Sarton was picked up, along with a number of her books, at an estate sale after her death two years ago. This being the Pine Tree State, visitors are encouraged to find the most spectacular pinecones to add to those lined up on a living room window ledge. Among the few pictures on the walls are a painting given to the owners by Maine artist Heidi Gerquest and framed pressed ferns gathered by guests in a shady spot just down the road.

Glad as they are to have family and friends stay with them in the big house in Dark Harbor, Marshall and her husband understand the pull of what she calls their "clubhouse for grown-ups." As someone who knows how houses work their wonders, she says, "If you're having a fight or finishing a novel or falling in love, this is the all-time best place to do it."



The interiors of the guesthouse, previously dark brown and red, were repainted off-white to make the most of the luminous Maine daylight. Opposite: Collections of pinecones and pressed ferns adorn the simple, cozy living room. Clockwise from above left: Original glass-paned kitchen cabinets over skirted storage for lobster-dinner equipment. Tiny dining room was created from a porch. White-painted secretary desk in kitchen is an old Maine piece. On the sleeping porch, a 19th-century iron daybed is framed by linen curtains, a material used by Mallory Marshall throughout the house "because it blows good."





The upper story of the guesthouse is the perfect place for dreaming, day or night. Clockwise from above left: Window seat on second-floor landing is covered in old velvet. Bird decoys perch above window in the Blue Bedroom. Rattan chair in bathroom was acquired for free after it went unsold at a country auction. James's Room, used by Mallory Marshall's decorating partner, James Light, retains a Victorian dresser and mirror that came with the house. Opposite: At the foot of a 1920s wicker bed, a blanket embroidered with verse written by Maine-born poet Edna St. Vincent Millay.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF MALLORY MARSHALL



Oh, to be there, and