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# colors of the west

WITH A NOD TO HER SOUTHERN ROOTS,  
IN CHARMING COTTAGE STYLE, FILLED

CAROL SMITH DESIGNS HER MONTANA RETREAT  
WITH COLORFUL FURNISHINGS AND ACCESSORIES



STORY BY PATRICK SORAN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GORDON GREGORY



PREVIOUS PAGE: Mike and Carol Smith's Montana retreat is a warm and cozy combination of colorful cottage-style furnishings and collectibles. THIS PAGE: Surrounded by the Rocky Mountains and nestled into an aspen grove, the home (which started out as a rental property) is finished with cedar siding and features a large wraparound porch. Designed by Van Bryan Studio Architects, (406) 586-4777.

Some are born Westerners, others are made Western by a single glimpse of scenery. Carol Smith went to Montana after her father had passed away to see what he had found so magical about it, to figure out why he spent his life's summers fishing there. "One panorama of the Rockies told me the whole story," she says.

Carol and husband Mike bought property and planned a house, but careers got in the way, as they so often do, and they ended up staying near Chicago. Then a smaller, adjacent bit of land came on the market; to protect their first investment they made another. Pretty soon they got to thinking that if there were a rental house on it, just a small one, they could cover their expenses and have a place to stay. So Mike and Carol found themselves designing and building a rental.

"It wasn't my dream house," Carol says, "it was just a rental." In other words, it didn't carry all the baggage of needing to be perfect. She had been clipping magazine pictures for ages; she gave notebooks stuffed with them to architect Van Bryan with Van Bryan Studio Architects in Bozeman. "What's my style?" she asked him after he had a chance to study them. "Uncluttered," he responded.

"We dreamed up a pretty good rental, didn't we?" Bryan chuckles. First, he settled the 2,200-square-foot home into a little aspen grove so it would be among the shifting colors of the quaking leaves. Carol and Mike didn't want logs, but cedar siding called out to them, as did authentically mullioned, double-hung windows. Bryan realized that the thing most renters argue about is who gets the better bedroom, so he designed two equal, two-bedroom suites—one upstairs and one down. He designed a dramatic two-story great room flanking the kitchen and anchored it with a fireplace faced with Montana slate. The finishing touch is the covered, eight-foot-deep porch wrapping nearly the entire house. "It's only a step above the ground, so you feel connected to the earth all the time," Bryan says.

Guessed the end of the story? No, the Smiths don't live in Montana full time—yet. But they kept that rental and made it their very own. And they do spend a good part of every year there. ►►



THIS PAGE: Potted plants, an Adirondack chair and an old-fashioned screen door painted barn red create a welcoming entry. OPPOSITE: A simple antique iron bed is covered with a patchwork quilt; an Edd Enders landscape hangs over it. Blue walls finished with crisp white trim make the room feel calm and cool. The home features two two-bedroom suites, one upstairs and one down.

THIS PAGE: The sun-drenched great room is anchored by a large fireplace faced with Montana slate and topped with a traditional mantle of distressed timber. OPPOSITE: The kitchen and dining room flank the family room, creating one large, open space; Western-style rugs add a punch of pattern. For resources, see page 83.



A friend had blueberry-blue countertops installed, and Carol liked the eye-popping splash. She picked red for her own home...then she balanced it with a pine breakfast bar. Next came the real spice—she added a stainless steel backsplash and kickplate. “It seemed like the fun thing to do,” says Carol.



“We rented it out three times,” she laughs, “then we wanted it all to ourselves.”

You might expect that Carol, a newcomer to the ways of the West, would have populated her home with elk-hide sofas and deer-antler chandeliers. But wherever you go you take a bit of who you are, and Carol is a dyed-in-the-cotton Southerner. Not one of those mint-and-musty mannered missies, though; she’s more the kickin’-it-on-the-coast girl. And that’s where the beach towel colors come in. “The colors are who I am,” she laughs. Bright and cheery.

Like the kitchen. That’s where the sunny colors got started. A friend had blueberry-blue countertops installed, and Carol liked the eye-popping splash. She picked red for her own home because she thought it felt “kitcheny.” Then she balanced it with a pine breakfast bar faced with good Southern bead board. Next came the real spice—she added a stainless steel backsplash and kickplate. Carol chuckles, “It seemed like the fun thing to do.”

The living room is just as lively. “The yellow walls feel like a day on the beach,” Carol laughs. Two of the side chairs are from Laura Ashley, and the other pair represent a shopping spree at Marshall Field’s. The tables and accessories are a mix of careful hunting and good friends. When her buddies discovered that Carol was designing a place in the Rockies, they started giving her Western wonders: a throw pillow in Montana fabric, horseshoe coat hooks and paintings of trout.

“In Montana the fireplace is the heart of hearth and home,” says architect Van Bryan. Here he took elements that represent the state itself and fashioned them into an almost symbolic gesture. The slate is Montana Jack stone, quarried nearby, and the mantle is a distressed timber, representing the long Western tradition of heavy wood framing. The fireplace’s exterior has important connections as well. It is sheathed in galvanized steel, as are many agricultural buildings in the neighborhood. “It’s a way of paying homage to the bucolic farm buildings and local history,” Bryan says. >>

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# NEW WEST

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Carol was ecstatic when Bryan started making such high-minded connections. "I'm a preservationist through and through," she says. After all, her real job is president of the board of directors of the Graue Mill, a living history reconstruction of an 1852 water powered sawmill. It's the only working water-wheel in Illinois. That helps explain her efforts to restore something a tad bit unusual, but important to the Rocky Mountain community—the painted stone "M" high above town that encourages students at Montana State University.

She insists that she's not an interior designer in the traditional sense. "I just like what I like." In both the living and dining rooms she started with bright hues, then filled out the rooms with

sparkling glimpses of her collection of Depression-era glass. In her own bedroom she began with a Garnet Hill quilt on an antique iron bed. Then she picked out a blue hue that pulled everything together. Over the bed she hung an Edd Enders Montana landscape.

The Smiths spend a lot of time in Big Sky's living landscape themselves: skiing, hiking, tubing, swimming in the rivers and fishing—just like Carol's dad used to do. ■

## DESIGN BOOK

**Architect** Van Bryan, Van Bryan Studio Architects, Bozeman, MT, (406) 586-4777

**Contractor** Tom Swanson, Swanson Construction, Bozeman, MT, (406) 587-8200

**Landscaper** Jim Foster, Bozeman, MT (406) 585-3389

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## THAT RELAXED FEELING

Like most architects, Van Bryan of Van Bryan Studio Architects hadn't done much with color in his career—until he designed this home for Carol and Mike Smith. "I wasn't sold at first," he says. Van had thought the brightness, particularly on the exterior, would stand out, but now he likes the way it helps the house blend cottage-like into the aspen grove. "Everything about the scheme helps it nest into its environment, but in a playful way," he insists. Since he worked on this home, he has used color on nearly every project. "I've started using a rich, saturated palette both inside and out."

A comfy, cottagey fit is a strong direction in home design. Van's firm has been working in what he calls a Tuscan Mountain Provincial style: thick walls with quaint windows, rocks from the Rockies and the broad detailing of the provinces. Now add a seating niche in the kitchen to gather guests



into the cooking atmosphere. "Everybody starts in the living room but ends up in the kitchen," he chuckles.

How quaint can quaint get? Lots of homeowners don't like to overdo the Western accents, Van says, but for others, "You could put a horse saddle smack in the middle of the dining room table for the centerpiece," Van laughs, "and it would fit right in."

Indeed, mixing the colorful, comfortable furnishings of classic cottage style with tables, lamps and art straight out of a Roy Rogers movie is the newest way to design a Western home full of personality.

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