

House Beautiful

SUMMER STYLE!

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SUMMER PARTIES HOT COLORS
FRESH-AIR DECOR & MORE!



GARDEN STATE OF MIND

In the solarium of designer Michael Maher's New Jersey home, black mullions graphically frame a panorama of the gardens. Maher enlarged a rug motif for the pattern on his painted pine floor. The cushions of the rattan sofa and chairs are covered in a Lee Jofa stripe, and the ceiling fan is by Hunter Douglas.



After lusting over a 19th-century architectural gem in New Jersey for years, designer Michael Maher finally became its proud owner. Now he's bringing up his two teen sons in the historic home he lovingly preserved—complete with a plant-filled solarium where they host evening dance parties.

THE FRESH AIR ISSUE



When Maher hosts a crowd for Sunday dinner—"I have a big family, and everyone's welcome"—he swaps out his dozen Theodore Alexander mahogany dining chairs for 18 bamboo ballroom chairs that he stores in the basement. Walls in Benjamin Moore's Bainbridge Blue provide a striking backdrop for a salon-style "hang" of rare 18th- and 19th-century Robert John Thornton botanical prints. Beyond the David Iatesta chandelier, a 10-foot archway leads to the living room and solarium—and their vibrant contrasts of light and color. Curtains in a Robert Allen fabric frame French doors that offer ready access to the back porch.

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We're just a hop, skip, and a jump from Manhattan—in North Jersey—but all I see across the street is lush, untouched woods.

MICHAEL MAHER: What looks like wilderness is actually part of a huge man-made “ramble” in the picturesque style of New York’s Central Park. This early planned suburb dates back to the 1850s, and it’s amazingly well preserved. The architect Calvert Vaux designed my house—one of the oldest here—around the time he and Frederick Law Olmsted were laying out Central Park. The nature and privacy have made this an awesome place to bring up my two sons, who are teenagers now.

DOUGLAS BRENNER: Was it difficult to juggle period restoration and 21st-century livability?

The property has changed hands often, but the house worked so well for each generation that it’s hardly been modified from Vaux’s original drawings. The owners before me had done all the dirty work—modern plumbing, electrical, and other upgrades. All I needed to do was paint and decorate! Vaux did such a fantastic job creating comfortable proportions and scale that the spaces are still family-friendly today. It reminds me of a European country house, where layers of history feel homey and inviting. Nothing’s so precious that you worry about kids tossing a football.

How did you discover this gem?

I grew up near here. Passing by, I would peek through the trees at the rear of the

house. Corny as it sounds, I always thought it looked like Thanksgiving. Much later, when a real estate agent took me up the front drive, I didn’t recognize the place. The minute we stepped onto the back porch, though, I was like, “Oh my God, I’ve been staring at this house for 20 years. It’s mine!”

Were the grounds a Sleeping Beauty too?

No. Deer are a major issue here. The only plants they hadn’t eaten were trees and scraggly rhododendrons. But I’ve been gardening since I was little, so I couldn’t wait to dig into all five acres. I built a 150-foot-long retaining wall and hauled in truckloads of topsoil to level off the back slope, and then I started putting in gardens—especially hellebores, ferns, and other stuff deer don’t like. Aside from boxwoods, there’s little clipped formality. I take inspiration from the Romantic landscape movement.

That romance has found its way into your living spaces, too.

Vaux believed there’s nothing like fresh air circulating through a house—just look at all his French doors. I agree. It drives me crazy when people keep their doors and windows closed all summer and crank up the air-conditioning. The boys and I start eating our meals on the back porch as soon as it’s warm enough outside to hold a spoon with our fingers. We’re out there until late fall. Gloves are the tipping point.

What’s your cure for cold-weather cabin fever?

My therapy is the solarium. Though it’s on the north side of the house, the big windows bring in plenty of sun during the day. I move tender plants here for a winter break from the back porch. Before becoming a

designer, I studied decorative painting at the Isabel O’Neil Studio/Workshop in New York, which teaches trompe l’oeil and other painted finishes. Here, I painted the floor in a geometric pattern of light earth tones that works with the plants, the landscape, and the house, and it brightens the whole room. We’ll have 8 to 10 people for dinner in here. It’s a great place to dance. See the heel dents in the floor?

The brightest sunshine bounces off your living room walls.

I’ve loved that warm, strong orange since I saw it in a New York antiques shop. When I spotted the perfect fabric for the curtains, everything came together. The art pops, the furniture pops.

And that intense pop of blue through the archway?

Because the living and dining rooms connect, I wanted to balance the orange with a color of equal value from the opposite end of the spectrum, so they can play off each other. That led me to this intense blue. And I like the way it makes these Georgian botanical prints—an indoor garden—feel modern. When I showed my scheme to Griffin and Lucas, their comment was, “Great. Thanks. You’ve painted our house the Mets’ colors.”



RIGHT: Maher with sons Griffin, left, and Lucas on the porch. **OPPOSITE:** An antique settee, 1940s French caned chairs with seats in a Larsen leather, and a multitasking porcelain ceiling fixture make the breakfast room a cozy hangout and homework station. Maher cut through a pantry wall to link this nook to the rest of the house.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Walls painted in Charlotte’s Locks by Farrow & Ball envelop the parlor-turned-living room in warmth and drama, while a Stark sisal rug tones down the formality of the antiques; the archway retains its original sliding pocket doors. Classical urns and a Chinese Chippendale chair infuse Maher’s easygoing landscape with history. Paintings collected on Maher’s travels hang next to the original parlor mantel. Maher owns architect Calvert Vaux’s 1856 drawings for the house, with its eclectic pairing of Gothic Revival dormers and a Second Empire mansard roof.





Maher's zest for mixing pattern and color enlivens a dormer lined with Farrow & Ball wallpaper. The grid of a Holland & Sherry plaid sets off the curves of upholstered headboards, as well as the varied rhythms of the Serena & Lily bedding and Lee Jofa embroidered neck roll pillows. Striking a lighter note, the patterned Dash & Albert rug harmonizes with both stripes and florals.



The 12-foot porch ceiling aligns with indoor cornices, Maher notes, "so it's a true extension of the interior, with comfortable seating and a place to eat." Fans and citronella candles repel insects from the unscreened space. **OPPOSITE:** In the stylishly utilitarian potting shed, Maher installed a Rohl faucet over an old zinc butler's-pantry sink set atop iron sawhorses. An early-20th-century Tramp Art mirror adorns a wall painted in a decorative finish. FOR MORE DETAILS, SEE RESOURCES