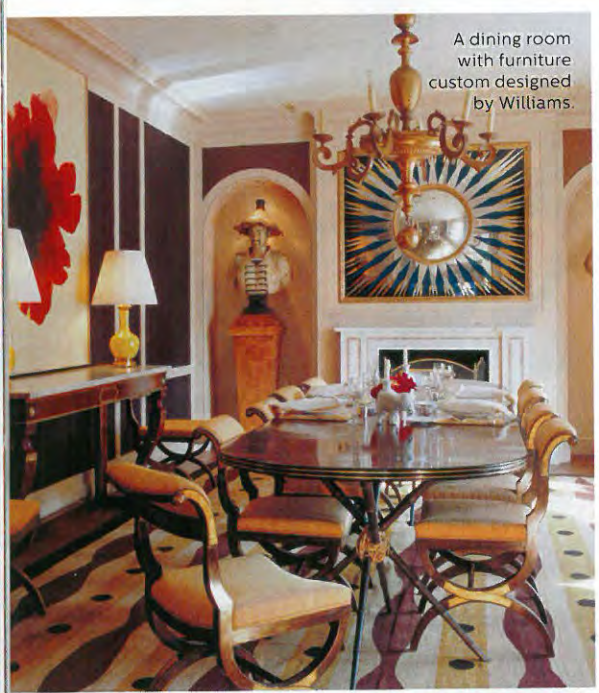
ELLE DECOR®
DESIGNERS WE LOVE
THE A-LIST ISSUE
06>
08033
0 270361 5
JUNE 2016
USA $5.99
ELLEDECOR.COM

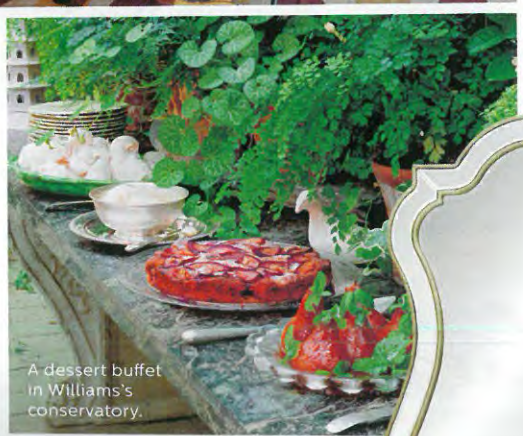
Bunny Williams in her garden.

WILLIAMS ON A DESIGNER'S EDUCATION

"You can never go inside enough rooms," says Bunny Williams. A lifelong student of design, the Virginia native moved to Manhattan in the 1960s and was hired by legendary decorators Sister Parish and Albert Hadley. Williams founded her own firm in 1988 with a pioneering approach rooted in striking the perfect balance, whether between traditional and modern, indoors and out, or casual and elegant. Along the way, she has written several books—including *A House by the Sea* (Abrams), out this fall—and started her own furniture line. Today, she creates collections for such firms as Lee Jofa and Ballard Designs and is working on projects ranging from a Georgian home in Ohio to an office building in Mexico City. She also tends to the Connecticut house and garden she shares with her husband, antiques dealer John Rosselli. "At the end of the day," Williams says, "I can't wait to get home." **INGRID ABRAMOVITCH**



A dining room with furniture custom designed by Williams.



A dessert buffet in Williams's conservatory.

EYE SPY

• Everybody wants to be famous at 30. If their blog gets lots of followers, they think it makes them a brand. A lot of work today shows a lack of experience.

• I worked for 22 years at Parish-Hadley, where I was exposed to amazing clients who led extraordinary lives. With guidance from Mrs. Parish and Albert, I developed my own eye and taste little by little, until, at age 42, I could have a firm of my own.

• I started my furniture line, Bunny Williams Home, 10 years ago. My collections for Lee Jofa, Dash & Albert, and Ballard Designs happened in the last four years. I wanted to feel I had earned the right to put my name on things.

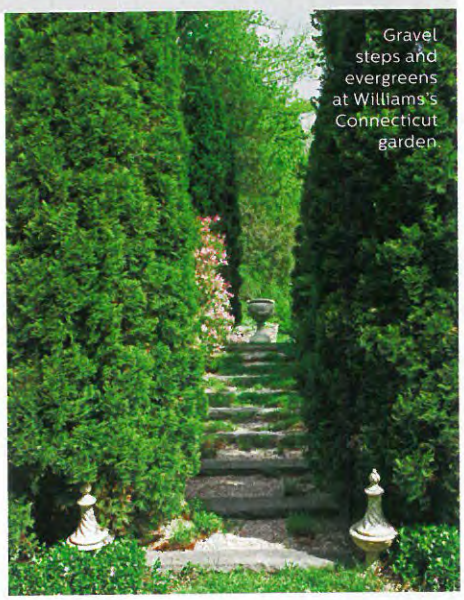
CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

• Technology is not a substitute for education. I can't ask a computer to design. I'll use the Internet to see what's at auction or in the shops, then go see those pieces in person.

• If you're going to excel in the design world, you've got to understand volume. When you see a room you like, measure it. How big and wide is it? What's the relationship of the ceiling height to the rest of the space?

• There have been many influential women in design, going back to Elsie de Wolfe, Frances Elkins, Eleanor Brown, and Sister Parish. Now many of the biggest decorating firms are run by men. It's a bit of a club. There are very talented women designers today, including Suzanne Tucker, Alessandra Branca, Ann Holden, and Kelly Wearstler.

Boudoir mirror by Bunny Williams Home.



Gravel steps and evergreens at Williams's Connecticut garden.

SHOP TALK

• There used to be three excellent antiques shops on every block of Second Avenue in New York. I learned everything I know from talking to the English-antiques expert, or the person who knew all about midcentury furniture. So many of these places have been lost.

• It's inspiring to go into a store where the dealer has a great eye and everything is the best of the best. It's just as exciting to go to a yard sale and find a Chinese export plate for $5. I find a lot of them because so few people now know what they're looking at.

• Period furniture and beautiful china are bargains today because people aren't buying them. I say, buy beautiful plates and put them in the dishwasher. I use my silver every day, so it doesn't even need to be polished.

PORTRAIT: FRANCES JANISCH; DINING ROOM, FOOD: FRITZ VON DER SCHULENBURG; GARDEN: RAFFAELO BENCINI. FOR DETAILS, SEE RESOURCES

UNCONVENTIONAL WISDOM

A watercolor of a Florida living room designed by Williams.

LEARNING CURVE

• Does the kind of education I got still exist? Yes, if you come and work for me. You can't get it in design school. I show my designers how to put together a scheme. It's not just selecting the color of the fabric, it's picking the right fabric for the right usage. Can you make curtains out of it? Is it too thin to put on a sofa? You have to be taught.

Bunny Williams fabrics for Lee Jofa.

• The biggest change in the interior design business is that people today want things done fast. They don't stay in the same place very long. It's almost easier for the designer. We get our schedule, we do the project, the people move in, and it's done.

• I think it's sad that in America, so many beautiful houses get ripped apart because somebody says, "I don't want this old house. I'm going to modernize it." We lose some wonderful things that way.

LIFE AND SOUL

• My husband is a great cook. I'm lucky my friends love to entertain. Every weekend in the country, we have people over or are invited to our friends' homes. I keep cheese straws in my freezer, cans of Virginia peanuts, and boxes of Duncan Hines brownie mix and pints of vanilla ice cream in case we have unexpected guests.

• Dinner doesn't have to be a gourmet meal. What's important is the ambience of being at home. John makes a potpie with chicken and duck. People think they've gone to heaven.

• I've been in my apartment for 30 years and had my country house for 35. I never think to get rid of them and try something new. Too much of my soul is in them.

• It's easy to have a modern white room. But when I look at magazines, I am drawn to the homes whose owners have lived there for 30 years. They've collected things and put them together. A white room has no memory to it. I have so many books. I like my things.

LAYERED LOOK

• Rooms are not stage sets. They're places where groups can sit and talk. I place seating so that eight people can sit together. The best arrangement is a sofa with two chairs on either side of it, another pair facing, and two benches.

• A room is inviting when it has comfortable furniture and a little bit of casualness. It is more interesting to place a chair at a slight angle. If a room looks like it has been laid out on a graph, it will feel like a dentist's office.

• Warmth comes from personality. Layer in textured pillows, cashmere throws, stacks of books—anything that makes you feel like somebody is actually living there.

GARDEN TOUR

• A great garden has to start out with a plan, just like a room. There is nothing prettier than a symmetrical, all-green garden with an allée of trees and boxwood. But what's really interesting is when you find a garden with a good scheme and an amazing plants person behind it—historical figures like Christopher Lloyd and Gertrude Jekyll, and modern gardeners such as Piet Oudolf.

• I'm going to England this summer to look at gardens with a group of close friends, including the garden writer Page Dickey and the novelist Roxana Robinson. We've traveled together before. This time, we're visiting Gravetye Manor, Hidcote, Sissinghurst, and about five private gardens that are supposed to be fabulous.

MAGIC TOUCH

• I don't want to keep repeating the same room over and over. I'm the luckiest person in the world because I get to do a variety of projects.

• I'd love to do a hotel. I've never been asked. I'm always astounded by how uncomfortable hotel rooms are, and they don't have to be. I'd have great lighting by the bed, places to plug in equipment, and storage for your makeup.

• A house comes alive when you use it. I don't care what it looks like. In my house, I add flowers, set the table for dinner, and light the fire. That's when the magic happens.

The garden at Gravetye Manor in Sussex, England.

In a living room, contemporary art is contrasted with an antique Oushak rug.