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VERANDA

PRECEDING PAGES: Soft blue walls in bedroom provide serene setting. Stately American antique four-poster is dressed in Chelsea Textiles fabric inspired by vintage English embroideries. Antique English Regency window cornices adorned with Robert Kime fabric. Club chair covered in Bennison fabric. English 19th-century dressing table blends with Hepplewhite armchair. American Federal chest and mirror is balanced by reproduction corner cabinet from John Rosselli International. RIGHT: "Charlie chose me at the Humane Society," Williams says of her dog, resting after playing with his stuffed bear. Williams delights in whimsical touches such as the birch-branch neoclassical mantel clock. Antique plates on wall are souvenirs from Williams' trips to Portugal. Engravings are 18th-century Italian. ABOVE: Bunny painting is a gift from artist Allen Blagdon. American, 19th-century cast-iron urn is one of a set of four.

is an adaptation of designs on Portuguese bedspreads made around 1810. She knows because she collects them. The Italian watercolors in the dining room were painted in the nineteenth century as tourist souvenirs. "They were the postcards of the time," she explains, sharing another bit of collecting knowledge.

How many shoppers can scan tables at a flea market and zero in on a rare, c. 1800 creamware plateau? Not even the dealer selling it, it turns out. Shaped like a Lilliputian garden wall, it features a pair of fancy gates and posts embellished with tiny flower pots in full bloom. "A city home would have had a silver plateau," says Williams. "This was probably made for a country house." Like hers.

The little neoclassical garden piece is a charming metaphor for Williams' rural Federal homestead, which has a white fence punctuated with wooden neoclassical urns. The recent addition of several outbuildings to the property—including a guest house crafted from the 1840s barn—makes the place look even more like the country houses around Charlottesville, where Williams grew up.

"I pushed the window out," says Williams, allowing the former tiny kitchen to bask in sunlight. Cane-back chairs around dining table contrast nicely with the curves of a 17th-century-style armchair in corner; all are French pieces made in the 1800s. RIGHT: Coin silver spoons rest on a stack of old Italian pottery plates. OPPOSITE: Porch is the summer living room.

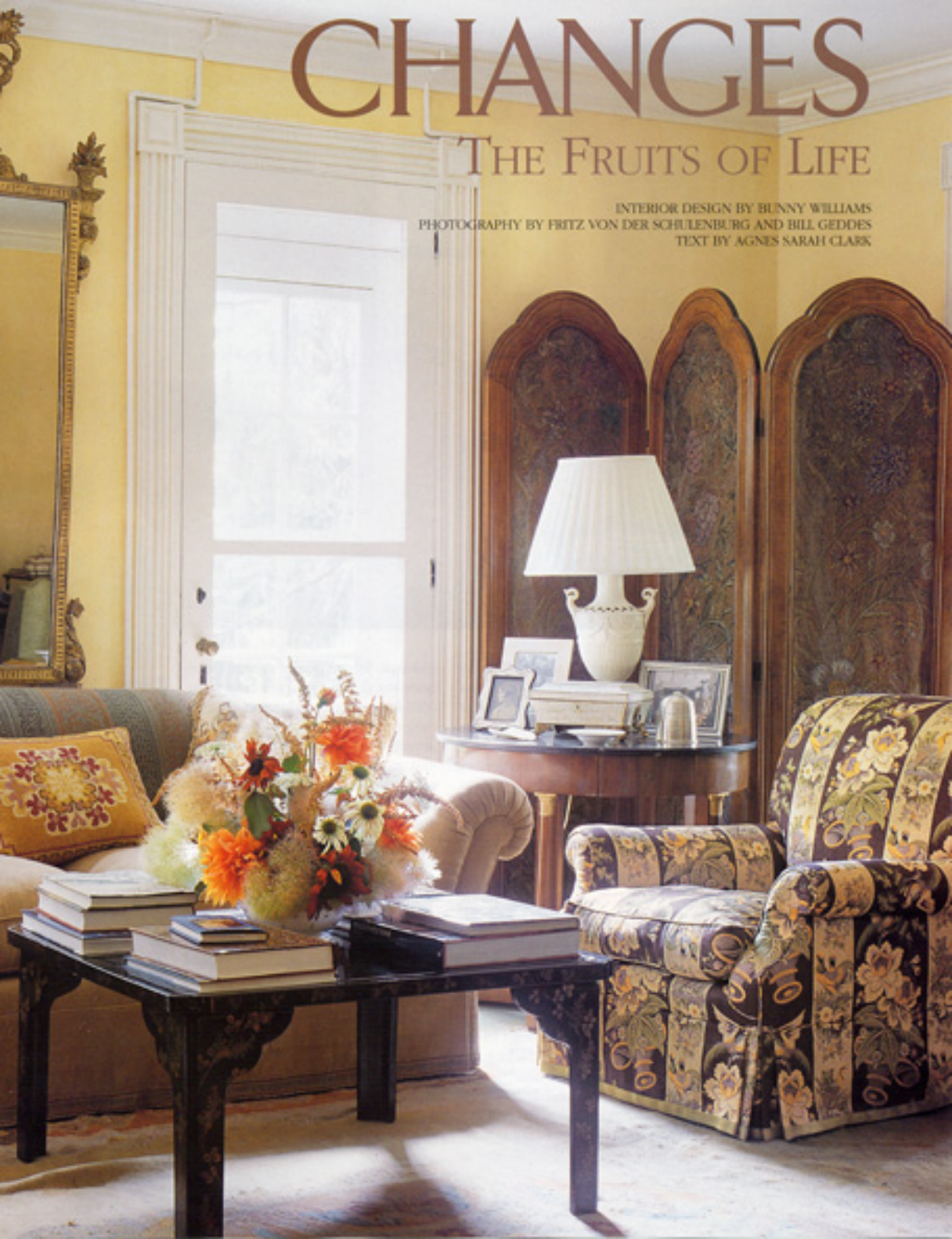
"All my relatives were passionate about and very involved in their houses," says Williams. "That's what I bring to my work. I want to give people great houses to enjoy and live in."

Now, as sunlight fades, flowers are on tables and a freshly baked cake swirled with white icing sits under a glass dome, awaiting the arrival of dinner guests. Rushing outside, the dogs surround the chicken house, sending hens scattering and squawking. Williams takes a twilight tour of the gardens. Surveying her homestead, she smiles. "Isn't it heaven?" □

CHANGES

The Fruits of Life

INTERIOR DESIGN BY BUNNY WILLIAMS
PHOTOGRAPHY BY FRITZ VON DER SCHULENBURG AND BILL GEDDES
TEXT BY AGNES SARAH CLARK



Welcome to Bunny Williams' Connecticut retreat. Visitors are eagerly met by a four-footed greeting committee. Charlie, a 57-varieties pooch with a perpetual grin, careens through the yard, followed by Elizabeth, an elegant, prancing whippet. Chugging along is Brewster, a former champion show terrier, who now spends his days happily sniffling tomato plants instead of competing for trophies.

Naomi Sun Chang, Williams' gardener, arranges enormous white dahlias that she's picked from flower beds near the orchard. John Rosselli, Williams' partner in Treillage, a Manhattan garden antiques shop, is in the kitchen cutting up tomatoes harvested from the garden. "John is the only person I know," says Williams, "who cooks for recreation."

And Williams? Her recreation is gardening, and most weekends she is wrist-deep in dirt. Mortals may not move heaven, but Bunny Williams has moved earth—truckloads of it—to reshape several of the fifteen acres around her house. Like Olmsted building Central Park, she has turned the thick forest behind the house into a picturesque, sylvan landscape.

Living room in Bunny Williams' country home displays an antique Aubusson carpet. Italian 18th-century mirror complements 19th-century pieces including an embroidered screen, Directoire marble-top table and black lacquer coffee table. Flower-and-rooster stripe on armchair is by Colefax & Fowler.

RIGHT: Williams' taste for neoclassical antiques is apparent in the living room. English Regency stools before the hearth represent one of her favorite design eras. "The American Federal mirror," says the designer, "is the exact period of the mantel, which is original to the house." ABOVE: "When your name is Bunny, you'd better have the best pictures of bunnies," says Williams, who was christened Bruce by her Virginia parents and has been called Bunny since childhood. These watercolors are English, as is the painted 19th-century card table holding an 18th-century alabaster urn.

One of America's leading interior designers and head of her own Manhattan firm, Williams has a keen sense about how houses and their gardens should work. Two years ago she published *On Garden Style*, a best-selling book that won praise from gardeners.

At the same time, Williams began the redecoration of her country house, a rambling Federal structure with a 1780s core and 1840s additions. "I had limited funds when I purchased the house twenty-one years ago," recalls Williams. "I bought it so I could live in it and little by little bring its quality up." In the first stage of her design plan, she filled rooms with well-chosen flea-market finds, stitched curtains from antique textiles and papered walls in patterns bold enough to disguise the absence of art, which her budget didn't accommodate.

Today the house fulfills its potential. Art hangs on the walls and fine antiques have preempted tag-sale furnishings. Where quirky slipper chairs once stood, there are now large-scale upholstery pieces. Fabrics in a subtle range of solid-color browns and greens have replaced pink chintzes and mauve stripes. While the old rooms were charming, the new rooms are quietly rich, soothing and serene. They bear the accomplished mark of a designer at the top of her game, working in an evolved, mature style.

"I've changed," agrees Williams. Within a decade, she points out, "I got divorced, set up my own design business and started Treillage with John." She and Rosselli, a premier antiques dealer and furnishings-maker for the design trade, definitely influence each other. "John and I are like bookends. We are constantly looking at things together. He says I am probably more severe about quality. I went through about as many changes as you can. But when you realize change is exciting, you can be optimistic about it."

"I splurged on good upholstery," says Williams about the recent redecoration of her country house. ABOVE: DeAngelis tufted-back armchair by library fireplace is covered in Rogers & Goffigon fabric. Unusual wing chair, recovered in Clarence House paisley, is a Sotheby's auction find. Landscape is American, early 20th-century. Lusterware pitchers reside on mantel. Hurricane lamps from John Rosselli. OPPOSITE: Mallilo sofa faces an English Regency bench used as a coffee table. Armchair seat in Glant fabric. Portrait is 18th-century English. Sea grass carpet from Patterson, Flynn & Martin.

She acknowledges the evolution in her decorating, too. "I've come into a confidence that only time gives you. I've cleaned up. I've gotten stronger. I want big scale. I'm not so interested in little stuff in a room. I'm more serene about what I'm doing."

The impact on her country house is considerable. Williams has fully mastered the art of making rooms that are comfortable, endlessly interesting—and not too sweet.

The subdued palette is so skillfully worked that the rooms seem undecorated. Inside, the hues of leaf and tree blend with, and never compete with, the gardens and lawn outside. Nature's panorama is visible from every window. "When I go to the garden, whatever I cut looks good with these colors," says Williams. "I like colors that are simple enough that everything works with them."

Against the soft, earthborn neutrals, the shapes of furniture and colors of decorative objects stand out. "I want to see the objects," says the designer,

who trained her eye early on by apprenticing at the topflight English antiques firm, Stair & Co. Her love of decorative objects, honed while working with Sister Parish at Parish-Hadley, is quite apparent.

She edits her collections scrupulously now. At another time she might avidly have collected small pieces of antique needlework. Now she collects examples of fine ladies' handwork in one of its largest forms—furniture. "I love old chairs with their original needlework covers," she says. In her country rooms she has gathered a stunning group of benches, wing chairs, stools and at least one French Régence chair, all dressed in splendid specimens of crewel, petit point and other fine old stitchery. "I can look through boxes of vintage textiles for hours," admits Williams, who still buys fine antique printed bedspreads to use as curtains and upholstery for small chairs.

Creative use of antique textiles is one of the ways Williams achieves the one-of-a-kind flourishes she relishes in decorating. She gleans ideas from her extensive travel and constant reading. "A decorator has to look at everything from sixteenth-century decorative arts to things made yesterday," she says. "Otherwise you're going to do fairly flat work."

The fruits of a life spent reading, traveling and studying objects fill the designer's rooms. The printed fabric on a living room armchair, she notes,

In the original 1780s section of the house, dining room walls display a bold Twigs & Company Nancy McClelland paper, which Williams put up herself over a decade ago. Antiques include a mahogany Irish console, tole chandelier, black-painted chairs, a whimsical barnyard-chicken portrait and a pair of pastel portraits, all 19th-century pieces. English mirror is 18th-century.