

DECORATING

Seasonal SPLENDOUR

TARA HALL, A HERITAGE HOUSE IN PRINCE EDWARD COUNTY, RECLAIMS ITS CROWN AS THE AREA'S MOST SPECTACULAR HISTORICAL HOME.

Text by DOUG WALLACE

Photography by JOHNNY C.Y. LAM

Florist Alison Westlake of Coriander Girl wove a live smilax vine garland up the railing for the holidays. "It gives a secret garden feel to any space and twirls around banisters beautifully," she says. **Floral arrangements** (throughout), Coriander Girl. **OPPOSITE:** Several salvaged antique tables create the dining room table, which can expand to seat 24. The tablecloth is made from Moroccan wedding blankets. **Antique dining tables, MacCool's Re-Use.**



Produced by Emma Reddington

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Homeowners Ian Letts and Shelley Durnin with Mei-Zee, their Australian shepherd, and Arthur, Duke of Wellington, their miniature golden doodle. *Mirror, Legacy Vintage; rug, Keep.*

home and gift store Kokito, in Bloomfield, Ont., and the owner of Keep, in Picton, Ont., while Ian is part of a commercial directing team, The Perlorian Brothers. Together they took on the renovation, painstakingly peeling back wallpaper, opening up partitions and turning ballrooms into comfortable salons and former maids' quarters into guest rooms.

Tara Hall has seen 180 Christmases since the original owner, merchant Archibald McFaul, moved into the home with his family. In those early days, the owners were famous for hosting lavish parties, some rumoured to have lasted several days. Under Shelley and Ian's stewardship, the house continues to rise to the occasion.

Q&A

HOUSE & HOME: *How did you find this place?*

IAN LETTS: We lived at our cottage on Consecon Lake for about three years after moving from Toronto, and we would occasionally pass this house, which had a for sale sign up. It was being used to warehouse antiques — nobody lived here.

SHELLEY DURNIN: I was one of those nosy people who just wanted to see the house before somebody else bought it and had their way with it. When I walked into the front hallway, that was it for me. I'm tall, and the 12-foot-high ceilings felt quite luxurious. I called Ian in L.A. and said, "I think we have to buy Tara Hall." CONTINUED ON PAGE 93

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WHAT DO YOU GET WHEN YOU COMBINE a history buff and a retailer with a keen curatorial eye? Only the perfect couple to tackle a historical home that's so stately it has its own Wikipedia page. Cited as "an outstanding achievement in its day," Tara Hall in Wellington, Prince Edward County, Ont., was originally built as a family home in 1839, but it only functioned as one for a few short years. Since then, the sprawling Georgian house has served as a boarding school, a Masonic lodge, an antique shop and a bed-and-breakfast.

Homeowners Shelley Durnin and Ian Letts bought the house in 2011 and have since toiled to bring back its original grandeur. Shelley is the co-owner of





An authentic brass Moroccan pendant in the the "casbah lounge" was found on a buying trip for one of Shelley's stores. The unadorned evergreen trees have a Dickensian charm.
Sectional, Gus* Modern; throw pillows, Kokito.





**“COMFORT IS OUR STYLE.
EVERYTHING IN THE HOUSE HAS
SOME CONNECTION TO FAMILY OR
TO A PLACE WE’VE TRAVELLED”**
— Shelley Durnin, homeowner

Flocked wallpaper from the 1960s decorates the walls in the morning room. Shelley’s prize Sögreni bicycle was custom made in Copenhagen. **Throw, Keep.**





Fairy lights dress up glass jars and demijohns. "Tara Hall is so perfect just as she is," says Alison. "We didn't want to upstage her beauty with over-the-top festive embellishments."



Simple cedar swags were draped over the doorway for a classic Scandinavian feel. Instead of ornaments, Alison tucked feathery dried florals into the branches of a Christmas tree.



BLOOMING WONDERFUL

For holiday decorations that last all season, **Alison Westlake of Coriander Girl** took a fresh approach to dried flowers.

Thankfully, dried flowers have evolved from the powdery bunches of baby's breath and shrivelled roses that earned the trend a bad rap in the '80s. Today's versions, arranged in sculptural bouquets and decorative accents, add an artful element to rooms and table settings. "Dried elements bring nature indoors on garlands, wreaths and doorknob hangers, and you don't have to replace them every week," says Alison. In Tara Hall, she combined simple boughs, undecorated

trees and dried flowers for an old-fashioned feel. Plus, she adds: "Many of the fresh flowers we used dry beautifully, letting the arrangement evolve through the holidays."

HER FAVOURITE DRIED FLOWER FOR HOLIDAY ARRANGEMENTS

"Hydrangea. An entire wreath made solely of dried hydrangea is really special," she says. Other favourites include juniper berries, lunaria, sumac, boxwood, pussy willow, yarrow, pomegranates, lavender and thistle.

HOW TO MAKE A FLOWER CLOUD

To create the floating floral arrangement in the dining room (left), Alison started by rolling chicken wire into two loose rectangular boxes. "We wanted this floral piece to feel cloud-like," she says. Plumming grasses, dried cotton and preserved ruscus were added, layering the florals asymmetrically and building out. Lastly, she added asparagus fern spray-painted rose gold to pop against the white cotton and bleached ruscus.



Photography by Alex Lukey, Alison's portrait

WEB

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ABOVE: In the principal bedroom, a Womb chair and faux fur accents are a modern take on glamour. *Eero Saarinen Womb chair and ottoman* by Knoll, *Gabriel Ross*; *velvet drapery*, *Lake House Linens*.

OPPOSITE, TOP: In the renovated principal bathroom, a white oak vanity and teal tiles have a tailored yet earthy look. The custom brass shower stall was inspired by one in The Bowery Hotel in New York. *Remodelling* by *Sam Elbadawi*, *Structural Anomaly*; *tile*, *Stone Tile*; *mirrors*, *RH*; *fixtures*, *Waterworks*.

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM LEFT: A mix of curated finds creates a layered effect in the parlour. *Table lamp*, *Brighton Estate Auctions*; *signed original lithograph* (top right) by *Fernand Léger*, *Era Antiques*.

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM RIGHT: An ornate chandelier balances the simple tub. *Claybrook stone tub*, *Ginger's*; *chandelier*, *House of Falconer*.

H&H: *With the scope of your renovation, how did you know where to start?*

SD: The very first thing we did was remove the wall between the breakfast room and the parlour. When the air and light started flowing between the rooms, it was as if the house breathed a sigh of relief. The plaster was starting to crumble in parts of the front hall and stairway — the wallpaper was the only thing holding it together! We used seven different colours of paint on the repaired plaster to match the walls. The wallpaper was installed in the late 1960s or early '70s; it's flocked and perfectly hung. I took the wallpaper down in the hallways because there was one teeny edge flipped up just begging me to tug on it. When I saw the green paint, I was so excited that I pulled off a whole piece, so there was no going

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back! We never guessed the patina would be so consistent throughout or that it would be so beautiful. I love that it shows the age of the house. The patina may feel itchy and scratchy to some but, to me, it feels textured and luxurious.

IL: The house had only ever been painted once — that's the green — and the patina is from years of wood smoke. We're outfitting several fireplaces with gas.

H&H: *How did you bridge the old with the new?*

IL: Tara Hall was an out-of-place oddity back in the day in terms of its style and scale — it's unexpectedly grand in a little village of a few hundred people. So, it can be eccentric again and a little fun, too. With the rigid Georgian plan, you want to feel like there's some softness around the edges, something playful.

H&H: *Are you absolutely inundated with curious guests?*

IL: From the moment you enter, it's obvious that Tara Hall was constructed for the purpose of welcoming guests. At no time of the year is that more true than the holidays. We like opening our doors to friends and family for dinners, parties and New Year's levees to celebrate and reconnect.

SD: Throughout the year, we also host yoga classes, coffee klatches and mini concerts. This house says: Bring in the people! **H&H**

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