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LABOUR OF *Love*

Four years in the making, designer Allison Willson's family-friendly cottage leans heavily on Mother Nature and casual summer living as muses.

TEXT KATIE HAYDEN
PHOTOGRAPHY KIM JEFFREY



STUDY THE IMAGES OF DESIGNER ALLISON WILLSON'S COTTAGE CAREFULLY and you might be able to guess at her favourite decorating source. It's not a top-drawer fabric and wallpaper house or an out-of-the-way antiques barn, though those did factor into the design of the lovely Kawartha Lakes, Ont., retreat she shares with her husband, Tony, and their five-year-old son, Oliver. Her design secret weapon is, in fact, found at the side of the road. "I drive around with snippers in my hand cutting down greenery to bring home," Allison explains. "The pops of colour in our cottage are from Mother Nature."

But nature's influence here goes well beyond vases full of Queen Anne's lace and dramatic aspen branches. Allison designed the inviting spaces as a quiet counterpoint to the cottage's views. "I wanted the rooms to feel relaxed and natural, and that, in large part, is due to our surroundings – the cedars, the birches, the water," she

OPPOSITE Homeowner and designer Allison Willson confesses that the striking rope-motif wallpaper in the entry was a splurge. "But I didn't require a lot," she qualifies, "and my mom and I installed it ourselves." A rope-adorned mirror carries on the theme, and a battered wooden table (a steal from an antiques shop) and an armful of evergreen clippings amp up the natural appeal of the space.

TABLE LAMP, MIRROR, VASE, Absolutely; brass **TRAY,** Vintage Fine Objects.

LEFT AND BELOW In the family room, a mirror crafted from a battered architectural fragment helps inject the soul that Allison felt the 15-year-old cottage needed. Pale walls, upholstery fabrics and accessories set a warm-weather tone, while mod black and white toss cushions and rug inject a design gravitas worthy of a top designer.

Grasscloth **WALLPAPER,** Thibaut at Kravet Canada; **SECTIONAL,** Sarah Richardson Design; **COFFEE TABLE,** ceramic **VASES,** Elte Mkt; **MIRROR,** The Door Store; **ANTLERS,** Vintage Fine Objects; **TOSS CUSHION SEWING,** Wesley Seto Design.





says. There are also the warm pine elements that are so integral to the home's interior architecture. "The pine wouldn't have been my first choice, but it does allow me to decorate with the cooler colours that I'm drawn to," she says.

Allison didn't so much design the interior here as embark on a four-year journey to make the cottage the family's own. It wasn't a process she felt they should rush. "When we're at the cottage, we simply want to enjoy it, so although I loved the process, I really wanted to take my time with it," she says. "Plus, I wanted the space to evolve organically with how we live."

While the 15-year-old cottage was roomy and structurally sound, it had been built from a prefab kit and lacked the character, those rustic storytelling details, found in cottages that are lovingly tinkered with for generations. "It really needed layers to give it a bit of

THIS PAGE Any cottage worth its salt has seating for a crowd. The massive tufted sofa in the living room was Allison and Tony's first big purchase as a couple; its cost is offset by the \$50 Allison spent for the room's settee. The imposing river rock fireplace anchors the room, and is the focal point of cooler summer nights.

Tufted **SOFA**, Montauk Sofa; **THROW** (on sofa), Gilstorf & Gray; **Undulate II ARTWORK** by Jacquelyn Sloane Siklos, Canvas Gallery; **JUG**, Vintage Fine Objects; large **BASKET** (on wall, centre), Kiondo African Imports.



soul," says Allison. "So we added textures like grasscloth, sisal rugs and shiplap, and freshened things up with paint and wallpaper." Allison admits she had a lot of fun finding furniture to fill out the warm informal rooms. "I couldn't drive by an antiques barn without swinging in to see what I could find," she recalls. "All the items I bought offer some sort of interest, whether they're patinated or weathered or woven."

Secondhand pieces suit cottage life to a T. "There isn't anything too precious to sit on. We're constantly coming in with wet bathing suits and towels. We love to have visitors at the cottage, and everything's very casual. Guests bring their dogs. Oliver's a kid – he's not concerned about clean feet. Antiques that have a bit of wear and tear or patina on them reflect real life."

In a refreshing admission from a designer known for creating chic impeccable spaces, Allison says she →


ABOVE Allison "softened things up" in the kitchen by balancing the cool greys and blues with warm camel-coloured grasscloth on one wall and paint-stripped salvaged wooden corbels on the island. A seagrass accent rug and sunhat-like pendant lights add summery style.

Village of Yorkville P5220-62
ISLAND BASE PAINT, Para Paints;
 Grasscloth **WALLPAPER**, Thibaut
 at Kravet Canada; **CABINETRY**
HARDWARE, Lee Valley; perimeter
COUNTERTOPS, Caesarstone
 Canada; **FAUCET**, The Rubinet
 Faucet Company; travertine
FLOOR TILES, Saltillo Imports.

BELOW Several years ago, a facelift spurred by the desire to enlarge the kitchen window ultimately saw new travertine floor tiles installed, the cabinets rearranged, open shelves installed and the island expanded. Calacatta marble gives the island a luxe look, while grey Caesarstone on the room's perimeter countertops is understated and super durable.

Wooden **CORBELS**, The Door Store; **BOWLS** (on island), Elte Mkt; blue glass **JARS**, Vintage Fine Objects.



A photograph of a dining room. A long, narrow table covered with a white linen cloth is the central focus. It is surrounded by black bentwood chairs. On the table sits a large white bowl filled with green herbs. In the background, a large window with white curtains lets in bright light. A lamp with a white shade and a textured base sits on a surface behind the table. Two white pendant lights hang above the table. The room has light-colored wood flooring and walls with vertical wood paneling.

The dining table is nestled in a corner of the great room bordered by large windows with views across the lawn - buffered by cedars, hydrangeas and dwarf lilac bushes - down to the lake. Black bentwood chairs seat eight at the long narrow table - draped in a humble natural linen that Allison stitched tassels onto for added interest. Enamelled barn-style pendants have an equally unpretentious aesthetic.

PENDANT LIGHTS, Smash; **VASE**, Elite Mkt.



LEFT, TOP While the cottage is newer and arguably sturdier than a decades-old lakeside retreat, architectural details like the exposed ceiling beams and knotty pine floors (shown here in the guest bath) imbue loads of old-school cottage charm. "The sisal rugs feel amazing on bare feet," says Allison.

Custom **VANITY**, Cabinet; **VANITY HARDWARE**, Lee Valley; **FAUCET**, The Rubinet Faucet Company; **MIRROR**, Absolutely; **RUG**, IKEA; **PRINT**, Tony Koukos; **VASE**, Elte Mkt.

LEFT In the master bathroom, wall panelling painted an inky blue is balanced by brass cabinetry hardware and rustic rope sconces (crafted by Allison, along with the woven pendant).

Custom **VANITY**, Cabinet; **VANITY HARDWARE**, Lee Valley; **COUNTERTOP**, Caesarstone Canada; **FAUCET**, The Rubinet Faucet Company.

ABOVE Allison took the plunge – both on style and budget – for the dramatic wallpaper in the master bedroom. "It's so high-impact that the simplest drapery, rug and bedding were all the room needed," says Allison. She had the headboard built from architectural salvage, leftover two-by-fours and beadboard. "It cost me a hundred bucks."

TABLE LAMP, Serena & Lily; **BEDDING**, West Elm.



ABOVE From its rope-wrapped chandelier and pitch-perfect old-fashioned snowshoes to its mudcloth throw and toss cushions, Oliver's bedroom, like the rest of the cottage, is layered with rugged textures rendered in quiet natural colours. The light-as-a-feather arrow decals on the walls were "very cost-effective," Allison says.

HEADBOARD, Sarah Richardson Design; **ARMCHAIR**, IKEA; **CHANDELIER**, Penney & Company; **DRAPERY**, **ROMAN SHADE** and taupe **TOSS CUSHION SEWING**, Wesley Seto Design; mudcloth **TOSS CUSHIONS** and **THROW**, Kiondo African Imports.

LEFT Ollie can while away rainy days playing or reading books in the toy tent in his bedroom. Tough wool broadloom carpeting is layered with a sheepskin rug for extra coziness.

Children's **TENT**, Elte; Sheepskin **RUG**, **BASKET**, IKEA.



thinks cottages are more interesting when they aren't flawless. "A cottage provides a wonderful opportunity to relax yourself. The scales don't have to be perfect, and things don't have to match perfectly."

That said, this cottage feels just right to Allison and Tony. "This was the first home we bought together, and it took time to figure out what we both liked – years, really, but now it feels so much like us. Nothing was rushed or compromised. Everything was found and purchased out of love, if that makes sense. And maybe in the end nothing matches, but that's what makes it perfect in my mind."

ABOVE The guest bathroom shower's vintage-style brass plumbing instantly gives the room an old-world look, and a ceramic garden stool and buoy-like wall sculpture reiterate the whimsical mood.

SHOWER WALL TILES, Salttillo Imports; **SHOWER FIXTURES**, The Rubinet Faucet Company; buoys **WALL ART**, Gilstorf & Gray.

FOR SOURCES, SEE OUR WORKBOOK

BOTTOM Elongated grey subway tiles give the master bath shower a sophisticated look, while tarnished brass hardware and a weathered wooden stool add some patina.

SHOWER WALL and **FLOOR TILES**, Salttillo Imports; **FIXTURES**, The Rubinet Faucet Company; glass **SHOWER ENCLOSURE**, Lindsay Glass & Window.

