

THE NEW COUNTRYSIDE CODE

Country style has come a long way since ‘rustic’ and ‘shabby’ – here’s how to embrace an elevated approach

FEATURE KATRINA HARPER-LEWIS

DESIGNERS are eschewing those old-fashioned associations with all-out chintz and dusty antiques when it comes to modern country style – today, the look is less about nostalgic charm and more about comfort and connection. We asked six top designers for their take on how to make country style relevant and achievable right now – from leaning into imperfection to ‘slow’ layering and incorporating organic elements – for an inviting yet authentic aesthetic which is guaranteed to endure.

■ True country style is not a decorating formula – it is the art of creating rooms that feel as though they have evolved naturally over time; rooms that tell a story. The best country houses have always been layered rather than designed in a single gesture. Historically, they were shaped by generations of owners who added pieces, altered rooms, inherited furniture, collected objects during travels and adapted their homes to changing lives. Choose pieces because they resonate with you, not because they fit a predetermined scheme. A house should reveal its personality gradually.

Henriette von Stockhausen, creative director of VSP Interiors, vspinteriors.com

■ Country style today is often misunderstood as a collection of visual motifs – florals, exposed beams, painted furniture – when in reality it is something far more nuanced. For me, country style is about a sense of place. My advice is always to begin with the architecture, embrace what is local to the setting and resist the temptation to follow trends. The most beautiful country homes are those that could only exist in that particular place and belong entirely to the people who live there.

Emma Sims-Hilditch, creative director of Sims Hilditch, simshilditch.com

■ One of the biggest misconceptions about country style is that it has to be rustic. In reality, country interiors can be highly sophisticated. It is not about filling a house with themed accessories or reproducing a nostalgic version of the past. It is about creating spaces with authenticity and a sense of permanence. Use

natural materials that improve with age, invest in pieces with provenance and don’t be afraid of colour.

Elizabeth Hay, creative director of Elizabeth Hay Design, elizabethhaydesign.com

■ For me, country style is less about replicating a 19th-century farmhouse and more about capturing the feeling of a large exhale. It’s a highly tactile aesthetic rooted in authenticity, natural rhythms and ease. The biggest mistake people make is assuming that ‘country’ means that a space needs to look deliberately messy or distressed to feel authentic.

Bee Osborn, creative director of Osborn Interiors, osborninteriors.com

■ It is about not taking decorating too seriously. It’s the antithesis of the overly curated interior – things inherited and collected over time, pieces that don’t necessarily match, layers that have built up naturally rather than been imposed. Nothing too precious. A room should feel comfortable and lived-in, with squishy sofas, mismatched armchairs, rugs layered on top of rugs and cushions you actually want to sink into.

Sean Symington, creative director of Sean Symington Interior Design, seansymington.com

■ The English country look is really about the balance of comfort and beauty. Essential elements are patterned wall-to-wall carpets, deeply comfortable sofas and armchairs (dog friendly, with lots of cushions), good lamps to make atmospheric pools of light, generous coffee tables or ottomans to pile up with books. For me, houses without books are houses with no soul.

Emma Burns, joint managing director of Sibyl Colefax & John Fowler, sibylcoifax.com

“Today it’s all about the mix; different eras of furniture can sit happily together – what matters is that a room feels collected rather than assembled”

SEAN SYMINGTON, Sean Symington Interior Design

PHOTOGRAPH CHRISTOPHER HORWOOD



A successful country look feels rooted in its surroundings and connects to the landscape beyond its windows, advises Emma Sims-Hilditch