

the new american country

Giftware and decoratives to meet the growing demand of those who seek to create a casual country-chic environment.

BY SHELLEY URBAN

DURING ITS HEYDAY IN THE 1980s, COUNTRY decorating was characterized by cutesy farm animals, dusty-hued stencils, and lots of lace. Over the past decade or so, that style of country has faded, and a new style has emerged. But this new American country style, described by **Susan Wagner**, editor of *Country Sampler's Country Business* magazine, as being much more worldly, shows subtle influences from French and English country decorating. As a result, modern American country is more sophisticated and has a much more timeless appeal.

While Ms. Wagner says the style was on the rise prior to 9/11/01, she and **Athene Kovacic**, editor-in-chief of *Giftware Business* magazine, agree that the attacks on the United States hastened its widespread return and contributed a "patriotic" influence to its look.

To help you capitalize on this growing trend, we're covering the details of this style and highlighting some of the country gifts and accessories to consider for your shop.

TODAY'S COUNTRY

"Comfortable and unpretentious, like a favorite pair of blue jeans." That's how **Sheila Bridges**, interior designer, author, and host of *Sheila Bridges: Designer Living* on the Fine Living cable television network, describes modern-day American country interior design. But despite its relaxed and gracefully aged charm, Ms. Bridges says that country interiors can also be as elegant as any other type of living space. And she adds that country homes aren't just for rural America anymore.

"What's great about [it]," Ms. Bridges explains, "is that you don't have to live 'in the country.' There are many



Photo by Anna Williams

city and suburban dwellers who aspire to a country style—it's relaxed, casual, and familiar—which is part of why it has such wide and timeless appeal."

Ms. Bridges also notes that American country is characterized by a mix of old and new furniture, much of which is painted; wide plank floors; stone fireplaces; and organic colors (deep yellows, greens, blues, and terra cotta) and textures (sea grass and sisal rugs) inspired by nature. She mentions that fabrics also define the style: "Plaids, checks, florals, and stripes look great in country interiors."

THEMES AND MOTIFS

Today's American country design style is best indicated by antiques and quality reproductions, primitives, and folk art. "Everything has an old-fashioned, homespun feel," Ms. Wagner reports. Adds Ms. Kovacic, "Anything that harkens back to a simpler time can fit the theme."

Aged metals such as tin and heavy wrought iron are at home in a rural-inspired décor as are ceramics and jars, whether new or old, if they appear old fashioned. Quilts and needlecrafted accents, which Ms. Wagner says represent nostalgic pastimes from old, are important accessories. And she adds that old-fashioned flowers, such as cabbage roses and others that consumers might associate with their grandmothers' gardens, will be found in textiles, art, and flower arrangements.

She cautions, however, that despite the many types of accessories that can fit the country home, today's American country is less cluttered than country styles of the past: "The lines are cleaner, and the pieces are useful as well as decorative."

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