

Interior design by
GINGER BARBER

Interview by LISA CREGAN

Photographs by
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SMALL AND

RUGGED

The key to a small
space is making it comfortable
and hardy



An 1850s guesthouse sits across the meadow from the main house on this 180-acre farm in Round Top, Texas. OPPOSITE: Designer Ginger Barber paired white painted chairs from her Houston store, the Sitting Room, with an antique Swedish pine table. Tumbleweed propped in an old wire basket makes an instant, Texas-style sculpture.



In the guesthouse, an extra-large club chair is slipcovered in Barber's favorite check, Marvic's Damier in Beige. The floor was stained chocolate brown and white, then topped with a cowhide found at a local antiques fair. Barber thinks the antique cage doll in the corner is "like a ceremonial angel keeping watch." OPPOSITE: Walls are painted Sherwin-Williams's Westhighland White. Botanicals are grouped tightly for impact.



LISA CREGAN: Hey, I thought Texans didn't do 'small'!

GINGER BARBER: Small? This is big fun! Good clean country fun out here in Round Top. You come winding down a dirt road through fields of wildflowers and you see this crisp little white farmhouse—that's the main house—then you look across the pasture and there's the pretty little guesthouse with its great big screened porch. Lucky guests. It really is a pretty little house.

Small spaces inside with a forever horizon outside. How do you design to that?

Well, first I had to make sure the main color running through both houses wasn't so noticeable. It's a soft creamy gray and it looks great against all the white. It helps the rooms feel bigger. It kind of goes away, so your eye goes right out the windows to the split-rail fences and herds of cows. What else did you do to give these little spaces room to breathe?



It's what we Texans call an old dog-run house, I guess because the dogs would just run up and down the big open breezeway. This one was built in the 1850s, and when we renovated we kept it open inside—a couple of bedrooms, a kids' loft with twin beds lined up like little sardines, a living room, and a place to catch a sink, that's it. Everyone goes up to the main house to eat at that wonderful outdoor dining room. The main house is even smaller: It only has a combined family room and kitchen, a master bedroom, and a master bath. What's the family like? He's a Houston businessman but he grew up ranching. He's got a great wife and two young children, and they love coming here on weekends with lots of friends and kids for four-wheeling and barbecuing. The farm is about 180 acres, with grazing cattle and fields of bluebonnets as far as the eye can see.

We boarded every wall in the main house with reclaimed wood and we whitewashed the boards for warmth. And since the rooms are small, I thought it was important to just enjoy the architecture of the boards—not to close things up by using too much art. You'd hate to add anything too precious, wouldn't you? I think comfort is about big scale. Lots of little things in small spaces tighten things up visually. Squeeze as much comfort into a room as possible—that's my motto! After the sofas went into both houses, we asked ourselves, 'Can we get a couple of club chairs into these living rooms?' Absolutely! Then we said, 'Okay, where else can we get a shot of comfort in?' So we added things like that huge ottoman in the guesthouse, big enough to hold a pizza board. And in the main house there's a nice wide coffee table for putting your boots up.

A nice wide table with the paint peeling off.

It's got great lack-of-paint, doesn't it? I love chipped painted things; they feel more natural, softer, more inviting. And that washed-out Swedish cupboard in the main house's living room is so wonderfully dull—I love that, too. I'll even take a new piece and work on the finish to get the look I want. If you look at that pine table in the main house, you'll see it's stripped raw, rosy raw. I used white chairs around it because I love the back and forth of crisp white against old and worn. Not what most people think of as 'decorated.' No, it's subtle, except for that brown-and-white-striped floor in the guesthouse. We did it for fun. We used porch stain to get that on-and-off paint look—imperfect. The shading's a little irregular so the age and patina come through. I believe in going in right away and getting some age started so it feels like home. If fifteen guys in cowboy boots come slamming in here, you don't worry about the floor getting scuffed. My rooms don't say, 'Hey, come in and look at me,' they say, 'Hey, come in and live with me.' With me, you gotta love life. You really don't worry about wear and tear! Again, you've got to live. You've got to be ready to throw the slipcovers in the wash and be done with it. My work is 90 percent slipcovers. I mean, this family's got two Jack Russell terriers, and they're always on the furniture. So why not a pattern that hides stains? Maybe a floral or something? I think a person gets sick of a floral sofa in six months, tops. And in a small space it probably takes even less time to get tired of too much color. The accessories are what give a shot of color to my work, and their shapes and textures add personality. A simple purple-striped coverlet does amazing things for a white bedroom like this guest room, doesn't it? And how about those sofa pillows in the main house? That red came directly out of the cow painting over the fireplace. That must be irresistible to a Texas girl like you, a big ol' cow painting. It's great, but honestly? I don't even know what kind of cow it is! Let me tell you what I really love here: the screened porch and that huge willow swing. It's part of feeling like a kid again—who doesn't have a great memory of being a kid on a porch swing? You sit and swing and listen to the bugs clicking, the cows mooing, and the coyotes yelling. And somehow it's so peaceful.

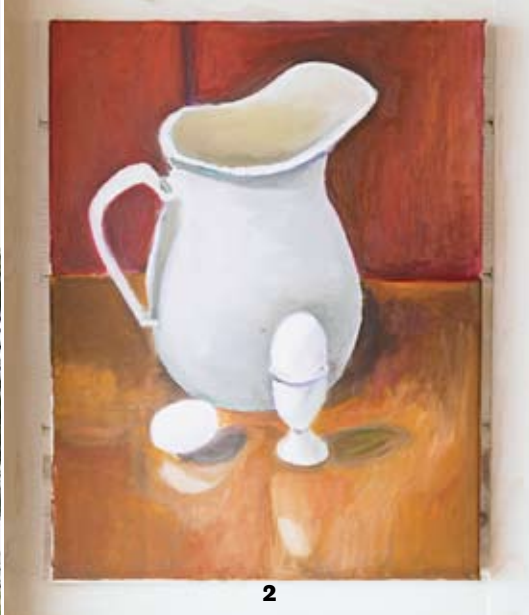
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"This limestone fireplace in the family room had an old Georgian wannabe mantel," says Barber. "We removed it and made this wonderful mantel shelf out of a simple old wood beam." The painting, *Gorgeous Grace*, is by Linda St. Clair. OPPOSITE: The walls of the main house are sheathed in reclaimed whitewashed wood. In the family room, a mushroom garden ornament sits on the coffee table. Upper cabinets in the kitchen were removed to draw the eye out the windows.



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1. Massive oaks dot the property. 2. A simple unframed still life hangs in the kitchen. 3. A fence post anchored in a sandpit awaits a game of horseshoes. 4. Barber placed a wicker blanket chest in the guesthouse's wide central hallway "to throw boots in at the end of the day." The large-scale checkerboard pattern on the floor "makes the space feel huge." 5. The main house's wraparound porch, with pastoral views. 6. A steer is ready for his close-up. 7. In the master bedroom, an antique chest and a twig mirror from the Sitting Room are paired with a small bundle of wheat, a playful reference to the bales of hay outside. 8. A rustic gazebo is the farm's only real dining room. Janus et Cie's indoor-outdoor Cannes wicker chairs surround an antique pine table that Barber stained gray to blend with the weathered posts. 9. "The master bedroom has a wild sage color on the painted bench and again on the bed," Barber says. "I love it against crisp white linen and whitewashed walls." 10. A small sofa in a guesthouse bedroom is covered in Schumacher's Kumar Silk Matka in Natural. Old grain sacks were turned into throw pillows. The cow photo is by Vivian Arcidiacono. 11. A window in the guesthouse gable opens to a brilliant country day. 12. Bluebonnets—the state flower of Texas—blanket a field. 13. An antique armchair in the guesthouse is upholstered in white cowhide. 14. "This old horse barn is like art in the yard. It's magic."



"I love a bit of purple," says Barber. The guest room's striped coverlet is from Neal and Co. The iron bed is from Ralph Lauren, and Barber had the bedside lamp made from an old staircase baluster. OPPOSITE: "This bathroom console in the guesthouse was an antiques fair find," says Barber. "It's all about the back and forth, crisp white vessel sinks and white walls against the worn zinc top and rustic baskets."

A willow swing and Janus et Cie wicker chairs on the guesthouse's screened porch are used by a rotating cast of family and friends. The coffee table is an old pigeon crate on wheels. "I use a lot of unusual baskets," says Barber. "I associate woven things with comfort." She also loves children's chairs. "I'm big on little chairs like these. I collect them. At a party I'll grab a child's chair from a corner and pull it up next to a friend and sit there for hours." FOR MORE DETAILS, SEE RESOURCES

