





SPLENDOR ON THE GRASS

With an eventful five-year restoration behind them, Nancy and Holcombe Green of Atlanta are finally able to bid the bulldozers good-bye and enjoy their quintessentially Provençal farmhouse and garden.

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JUST OUTSIDE THE VILLAGE OF ST.-RÉMY-DE-Provence, an avenue of venerable plane trees leads to a charming country estate. With its dramatic view of the Alpilles mountain range across a field of lavender, the vine-covered farmhouse, set among gardens and ancient olive groves, seems an elegant example of a country house that has evolved gracefully over the generations.

Appearances are misleading. When Atlanta couple Nancy and Holcombe Green became the owners of the 160-acre property ten years ago, the house was in serious need of restoration—as were its collection of rundown outbuildings and the garden, at the time just a mix of muddy fields and jungle. “We bought the view,” Holcombe admits, “and a wonderful piece of property that happened to have a *mas* [farmhouse] that could be restored.”

Holcombe, an industrialist (he is chairman and CEO of WestPoint Stevens textiles) and philanthropist (he was the

Soaring plane trees, some more than 400 years old, shade the Greens’ back terrace (above), as well as the front of the house (previous pages). Many were transplanted to the site. In the drawing room (right), Provençal fauteuils flank a massive stone mantel bought in Aix. An urn-shaped faïence brazier sits in the foreground.





The second-floor landing (right) shows off the terra-cotta tiles that run throughout the house. The 18th-century French tapestry *de verdure* was formerly owned by the Getty Museum. At the front of the house, a shaded terrace (below, right) includes a *balançelle*, or awning-covered swing, from Hervé Baume in Avignon, a top maker of garden furniture. The Greens gather beneath the trees (below, left) to watch their view of the Alpilles change with the setting sun. Opposite: "I don't like blue pools," says Nancy, who chose to paint hers black. "It gives a better reflection of buildings and trees."





lead donor for Yale art school's Holcombe T. Green, Jr., Hall), and his wife, Nancy, are not novices at building, decorating and furnishing houses. In addition to their primary residence, in Atlanta, they have a Sea Island, Georgia, beach house, a North Carolina mountain retreat and a stylish New York apartment. They'd been traveling in France for decades and renting in Provence for five years when they decided to buy a place in St.-Rémy: the Provençal lifestyle, an antidote to their high-powered American schedules of business and volunteer work, had cast its spell.

"We come here to relax," says Nancy, "to read, garden—Holcombe is in the garden ninety percent of the time—enjoy the local markets and take long walks with our dogs in the Alpilles." And they love to entertain. "We've made so many wonderful friends here," she adds. Entertaining space would be a priority, then, in redoing the house.

And yet despite their previous experience and the stellar cast they assembled to help—New Hampshire-based resto-

ration architect Robert Raley, New York decorator Bunny Williams and London-based landscape designer Tim Rees—the task of renovating the house and creating its twenty-five-acre park and gardens was unlike anything they had ever done before. When asked how long the work took, Holcombe sighs: "Forever. We started another lifetime ago." (The project took five years.) Today, visitors to the house, whose gracious, light-filled rooms are decorated with exceptional pieces of 18th-century Provençal furniture, faded Oriental carpets, comfortable sofas and a connoisseur's collection of contemporary art, must leaf through Nancy's "Before" scrapbooks to grasp the magnitude of its transformation.

The challenge was to make habitable interiors out of a house that had parts dating back to the late 16th century, including a converted barn, along with 18th- and 19th-century additions in a gamut of styles (one end resembled a Swiss chalet). What's more, Provençal building restrictions limited the changes that could be made to the exterior and prohibited





any increase in overall square footage. Holcombe aptly terms the original house “a rabbit warren of little rooms”—about fifty in all, including thirteen second-floor bedrooms and just one bathroom. After initial consultations with several French architects, Holcombe called Raley, who had designed the Greens’ Sea Island house and was known for his work in the White House and at the du Ponts’ Winterthur.

“They wanted an American floor plan,” notes the architect, one made up of large, well-proportioned rooms. Raley warned them that the renovation might be long and expensive, but that it would likely result in a handsome house. And indeed it has. The makeover was so successful that “French families have told me it looks more like a Provençal home than many being done by the French,” he reports.

After dining several times with the Greens at the house they were renting nearby during the renovation, the architect decided to extend the dining room. “He noticed that we never had fewer than seventeen or eighteen people at the table,” Nancy says, laughing. “In Provence, when you invite someone, you are inviting his whole house, guests and all. The number is almost a moving target.” Raley also designed the pool pavilion and redesigned a small outbuilding into a Trianonesque orangerie, with a classical façade, three skylights, a beamed ceiling and heated stone floors. The Greens entertain up to fifty guests there, in all weather.

Architect Robert Raley transformed a former barn into an imposing orangerie (left) for entertaining, with heated stone floors, skylights, a wine cellar and a full kitchen and bath. The table, chairs and chandelier are antiques from shops in the nearby town of L’Isle-sur-la-Sorgue. Above: The garden of olive trees was Holcombe’s idea.



The interior décor was also subject to revision. Nancy began working with local decorators Marco Lillet and Bernard Paul, who helped her find some outstanding antiques. The huge 18th-century mahogany dresser in the hall, for instance, was unearthed in a Camargue house while still built into the floor. But once the Greens had moved in, they decided the décor needed Bunny Williams's touch. "We'd worked with her on several New York apartments," Nancy recalls, so Williams was well aware of the couple's preferences.

"We did not try to make it a period Provençal house," says Williams, "but to make it look like the Greens, who live with great taste and style—with books, paintings, objects and flowers everywhere. Their home is beautifully run and elegantly done, but very comfortable at the same time, with a warmth that is fantastic." The Williams touch is demonstrated in the dining room, where 19th-century chinoiserie wallpaper panels are informally hung in bamboo frames, and in the beautifully coordinated French floral prints and striped fabrics she

chose throughout the house. Much of the Provençal furniture was tracked down in New York, Connecticut and Atlanta, where, the decorator admits, many of the best pieces are now to be found. Elsewhere, paintings and sculptures by Joan Mitchell, Larry Rivers, Esteban Vicente, Elisabeth Frink and others light up the house, giving it a strikingly personal dimension and affirming the discerning tastes of its owners.

There is art in the garden too. Pieces by William Turnbull and Beverly Pepper are interspersed with new work that reveals what Nancy says is "our latest passion, buying contemporary sculpture in England." (The Greens' major collections in the States are of 19th-century American neoclassical furniture

Many of the Provençal antiques in the master bedroom (above) were acquired in the U.S. and "repatriated." Manuel Canovas's Clarisse fabric is used on the walls and furniture and for the curtains; Rose Indienne from Clarence House is on the bed hangings and headboard. Opposite: Nancy's study includes a quiet alcove.







and 19th- and early-20th-century American Impressionists.)

The linked garden rooms, a design collaboration between Holcombe and Tim Rees, are also characterized by artistry. There is a walk lined with pale green and pink hydrangeas, a garden of French roses, including Nancy's favorite, the peachy-pink 'Claude Monet,' and a kitchen garden that is planted with unusual Gallic vegetable varieties. (The produce makes its way into exquisite meals devised by the Greens' chef.) Beyond the pool, four squares of ancient olive trees, each specimen chosen for its sculptural qualities and underplanted with silvery santolina and blue germander, outrivals many contemporary art installations. And the topiary garden of geometric boxwood offers one of the landscape's most beguiling perspectives—a lyrical contrast between topiary, plane trees, lavender fields and the rugged Alpilles in the distance.

There were failures along the way in the gardens, but with perseverance the Greens pressed on toward perfection—and perhaps beyond. "Perfectionism is not the word," confirms Rees. "They were the most amazing clients."

His meaning is underscored by the following anecdote: The Greens' magnificent Alpilles vista—that is, the *raison d'être* behind their buy—turns out to have been not quite today's picturesque panorama when they first saw it. In the distance were the same *pilons*, or rocky outcrops, that had given the house its name (Mas des Pillons). But so was an all-too-contemporary pylon, a red-and-white electricity tower despoiling the couple's view of a wildflower meadow and lavender fields. And so a gently sloping forested foothill was made-to-measure—twice. "It was a helluva adventure," Rees recounts. The mound was first built ten feet tall and planted with thirty-foot trees, but it wasn't high enough to hide the atrocity. "Everything came off, and we raised the summit to twenty-three feet. I was on top of the hill with a walkie-talkie, and Holcombe was in the house with another as eighty-foot trees were placed with the help of a whopping big crane. 'Move it a little to the left,' Holcombe would direct." Fifty of the "thousands of trees" that Rees estimates were planted on the property accomplished the task.

Today all this aesthetically positioned greenery is looked after by a team of five gardeners, headed by Didier Larnac. The Greens agree the hard work has been worthwhile. "The house and garden have given us a tremendous amount of pleasure," says Holcombe. "The glorious thing is that the construction is finished," Nancy adds with relief. "The bulldozers used to drive in at seven A.M. Now it's heaven. We can just enjoy it." And they do, planning this year to spend six months in Provence. Not such a second home after all. ✕

Garden designer Tim Rees laid out an immaculate topiary landscape on one side of the house, with mature boxwood, yew and holly forms imported from Belgium. Holcombe enjoys the contrast between topiary, plane trees and the rocky Alpilles in the distance.