

# FRENCH RUSTIC

*Family goes for a heavy Gallic accent to do justice to the magnificence of Georgian Bay*

BY VALERIE HOWES  
PHOTOGRAPHY BRANDON BARRÉ AND VINCENZO PISTRITTO  
STYLING LAURIE CLARK

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Photo by Vincenzo Pistritto



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*“We mimicked France,  
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**INSPIRED BY HOUSES AND GARDENS** they saw on vacations in the southwest of France, a Barrie family wanted to inject Gallic character into their second home, a 10-acre property near their horse farm in Collingwood.

It took a little nudging at first to get local workers into old-world mode. Landscape designer James Dale, co-owner of Earth Inc. designed landscapes, recalls the instructions given to the stonemason as he toiled on 250 feet of natural stone walls: “You’re trying too hard. Have a couple of glasses of wine, then just throw the mortar on; don’t bother to smooth it.” The end result: an instant time-worn French rustic effect, which defines the property from the moment you turn onto the curving gravel driveway.

“We mimicked France, but still wanted to keep the vernacular of Georgian Bay,” says Dale. The stone for walls and the puzzle-shaped walkway slabs was all sourced from Owen Sound. The pergola by the dining area was made from old barn timbers and the porch decking repurposed from fence posts on the homeowners’ farm. One exception was the colourful pea gravel in the outdoor dining area. The family had fallen in love with the stuff at French bistros and wanted the real deal.





*“Before, you couldn’t even tell there was a beautiful pond down there.”*

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The grand-scale house sits high on a hill overlooking the escarpment and Georgian Bay. “Before, you couldn’t even tell there was a beautiful pond down there,” says Dale, who suggested cutting down the section of forest that initially obstructed the sweeping views. “I took the client upstairs to see what they were missing out on from the bedroom window, because at first he thought the idea was crazy.” After clear-cutting that area, the team planted 200 conifers at the front of the house to create a foreground that would act as a wind block and barrier to snowdrift from the road.

Dale’s team also planted thousands of perennials in different colours -among them lavender, oriental poppies and hydrangeas - to flower from spring until late fall. “My wife wanted it to look like a Monet out there,” says the homeowner. The garden is just a year old now, but within three years it will mature and show its full glory.

For contrast, there’s also a formal low-structured parterre garden at the back. “It gives a chateau feel, when you’re looking over the meadows from the house,” says the homeowner.

Since the gardens wrap around the house and are visible from every window, it was important to make them look good from all perspectives. The materials of the planters and urns all tie in with the wood used for the interior cabinetry, and the height and placement of individual elements were planned to optimize views.

When the family first took possession of the home, it was decorated in Cape Cod style. They replaced the kitchen and bathrooms as well as the location of some walls and stairways. Stripped back to studs, the walls were repainted in creams. The oak floors got the whitewash treatment, and outside, soft grey shutters were hung. Those were custom-made by artist and designer Bruce Batemen, owner of Batemen Furniture. He used red cedar for durability; the design, with classic fleur-de-lys hinges, was based on pictures snapped in the Pyrenees.

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The furniture the homeowners brought in is a mix of new, custom and antique pieces, although the vast majority was sourced at Restoration Hardware. “When we were buying, they had a French country theme going on, so the timing was perfect,” says the homeowner.

Downstairs, an entire wing is set aside for guests. The king-size metal bed in the main room is repeated in the children’s room where four matching metal twin beds are lined up. “We wanted it to be like the storybook, where Madeline and all her friends slept in a row,” says the homeowner.

The master bathroom was done by Peckham d’Olivat Construction with fixtures from Bathworks in Barrie and custom cabinetry and mirror by Batemen Furniture. A relatively tight space with a small cubby hole-like window, it needed a rather vertical, round tub to keep a sense of airiness.

Days begin and end in the sun porch, where the family - and sometimes friends from the local equestrian community - lounge on the cast aluminum seating from Restoration Hardware’s outdoor collection. The songbird cushions, an inexpensive find at a Thornbury garden centre, brighten up the space. “We drink coffee and read the papers here in the morning,” says the homeowner, “and in the evening, we sit and talk about the horse farm, while our girls are outside with friends. We can see them playing in the fields.”

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Casual meals happen in the kitchen, also fitted out by Bateman. “Bruce came to our property twice, bringing ideas we’d never have thought of,” says the homeowner. He moved and expanded the island, creating a huge marble-topped workspace with room for four stools.

When guests visit, everyone eats at the more formal dining room table. Bateman built the dark-topped piece with its elegantly curving legs, inspired by pictures from a French interiors magazine. The suspended lighting comes from Restoration Hardware; while it looks like rows of real wax candles, the piece is actually electric.

In the living room, the original white stucco fireplace was refaced with old French stone, colour-matched with the garden walls. The floral paintings in this room also repeat the colours of the blooms outside, creating an overall sense of harmony.

When the family is not here, they’re at their Frank Lloyd Wright-designed property on Lake Simcoe, so they get to enjoy the best of both worlds. “We love going from modern to this French country house,” says the homeowner. “It’s a nice transition.”

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