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by JOSH GASKOF photographs STACY BASS

# FRENCH CONNECTION

Bicoastal designer Francine Gardner unwinds at her serene, European-style home in Stamford



Among the late-20th-century ranches and contemporaries of North Stamford, past countless formal stonewalls and acres of manicured turf, you'll find a particularly windy road. Take it all the way to the end, cross a broad, wooden bridge—and you'll be transported 6,000 miles.

There, across a woodland clearing, is a low-slung cottage. The building is shaped like a U, and its large courtyard explodes with clematis, weeping cherry trees, and dogwoods. Seeing the abundant garden against the house's moss-covered wood roof and white lapboard siding, you're sure you've arrived at a chateau in Provence.

Welcome to the home of renowned interior designer Francine Gardner. A native of a tiny town near Bordeaux, she crossed the pond to get a bachelor's in finance and then an MBA. Life in America stuck,

but life on Wall Street did not, and Francine soon found herself working in New York's fashion world, and then eventually at an interior design studio. By the early 1990s, her own design business was booming. With frequent travels to Europe, Asia, and Africa in search of antiques for clients, and with an attorney husband and two young kids, she wanted a home near, but not in, the city.

Unfortunately, even in those pre-boom days, the choices were limited: Everything commutable in her price range was a basic suburban box. "So I finally told my real estate agent, 'Show me the stuff that nobody wants,'" Francine explains. And that's how she came to this extraordinary place. Back in the 1920s, when all this land—including the neighboring Mianus River Park—belonged to the estate of New York financier Robert Goodbody, this structure was built as his stable. It had



In the main living area, massive glass doors on either side give the space an indoor-outdoor feeling and connect the front and back of the property. **opposite:** A garden bench by the stone wall provides a quiet spot for reading, relaxing and cat naps. The entryway to what was once a stable is floored with the terracotta tiles that give the whole house an old-world appeal.



In the living room, the white Modenature Chelsea sofa, Antoine Bamboo Cocktail table, and Jose Floorlamps by Jose Estevez are all from Interieurs, Francine's New York-based design store. The unusual side tables are antique rain drums that Francine found in Laos.

been converted for human occupation in the 1960s but was in total disrepair. Still, what Francine saw was a place that would feel like *un peu* of Southern France right here in Southern Connecticut. The agent couldn't even get her inside the building on that first visit, and yet Francine made an offer on the spot. Then she called her husband to tell him they were on their way to being homeowners.

Or stable owners, really. The place would need a gut-renovation before it could truly be called a home. The kitchen and bathrooms were tenement grade, and the wall-to-wall carpeting throughout festered with visible mold: That, it turned out, was thanks to the steep slope behind the building, which had caused it to flood during probably every rain-storm over the previous 70 years. Nonetheless, the family moved

in—and began a complex restoration and re-creation project that had them living in an ongoing construction site for many years.

With its walls of local fieldstone and tree-width hardwood beams, the structure itself remained amazingly sound. The ceilings of clear-finished mahogany beadboard were also unharmed, and it took only a light touch to operate the heavy sliding barn doors on their original overhead metal wheels and tracks. Many windows were also salvageable, and the old stable master's quarters provided the starting point for an attached mother-in-law apartment. Job one, though, was installing a new roof, of wood shingles to stay true to the building's history. Then every inch of plumbing pipe and electrical wiring was yanked out and replaced—along with the kitchen and bathrooms. When the contractor removed a false

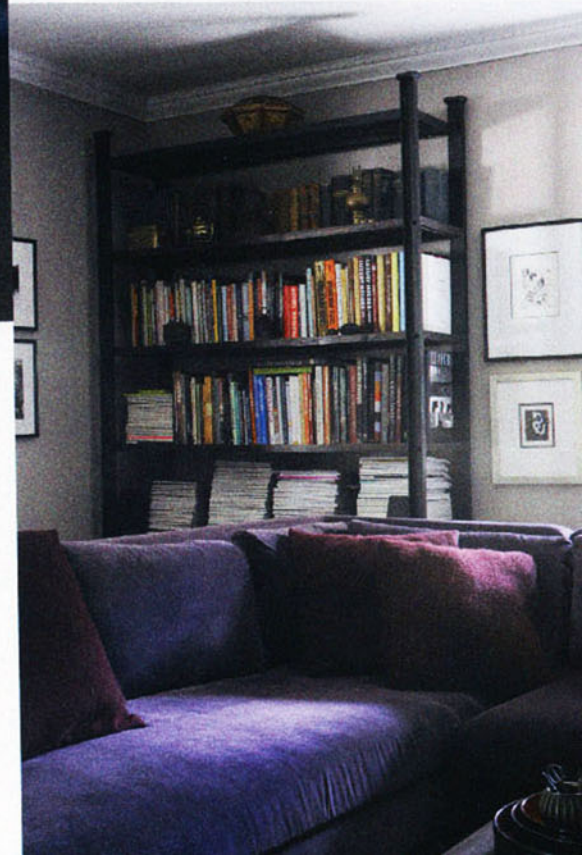


Francine's furnishings are a blend of one-of-a-kind antiques and sleek Modernist pieces. The white chaise shown above and at right is a Modenature Renversant lounge. **top right:** This drop-leaf table is an early American antique, topped with an antique figurehead from Gabon. **near right:** A large vase filled with terracotta-colored dahlias.





Francine relaxes in her den on a Stephane L-Shaped sofa from Interieur. The plush sofa is adjacent to bookshelves, making this an ideal spot for curling up with a book.





The sleek yet earthy kitchen counters are topped with Pietra Serena stone; faucets are Franke in stainless steel. The handblown Jason pendant lights are from Interieurs.

wall, he discovered a sturdy staircase to a long-sealed hayloft, which has now become a bonus storage room. Under the putrid carpeting was a poured concrete slab, making wood flooring impossible (because moisture wicking up through the cement would have rotted the boards), so Francine imported handmade Saltillo tiles from Mexico. To give them the patina of age, she painted each tile with an adobe-red glaze, wiping some of the wet finish away to expose the terracotta underneath, almost as if she were pickling wood. As a result, the highly waxed floors have an appealingly worn look and seem like original features.

That's fitting, because this renovation was designed not to modernize the building but to bring it back to its roots. Everywhere you look, you see intriguing bits of its agricultural past. On many walls, there are tie rings where horses were once saddled up, and a ceramic salt lick hangs by the fireplace in the family room.

Still, the biggest contribution that the building's past has made to this home isn't an objet d'art; it's the floorplan. The horses' pens had

been arranged as a row of stalls off a roofed open-air walkway. Francine built the bedrooms and bathrooms where those horses' quarters once stood—and turned the walkway into a stunningly unusual hall. In most houses, the hallway is in the middle, perhaps with access to natural light at either end, but here it runs along the full front of the bedroom wing of the building. Floor-to-ceiling glass encapsulates it as indoor space, turning the corridor into the brightest and most spacious part of the house, with the best morning sunshine.

No less unusual are Francine's furnishings, which also meld place, time, and style. She was one of the first designers to combine two seemingly unmatched ingredients: one-of-a-kind antiques and sleek Modernist furniture. And these antiques aren't the traditional chests of drawers and other classic pieces you might expect. She collects industrial artifacts—a coal-mine cart from France becomes a coffee table, a metal factory table becomes a desk, a well-worn steel apothecary cabinet becomes an armoire. The bamboo tables and

A long hallway connects the "stable" portion of the house with the main living area.  
below right: One of the choice antiques in the bedroom, this Prie Dieu prayer chair belonged to Francine's French great-grandmother.





Sitting on top of an antique painted chest of drawers is an antique alabaster Buddha from Burma.



Francine built the bedrooms and bathrooms where the **HORSES' QUARTERS ONCE STOOD**—and turned the walkway into a stunningly unusual hall



Lush climbing vines and lavender-hued perennials continue the French sensibility outside the house.





Large, old trees around the property speak to the history of the place. On an open porch, an upholstered daybed invites you to linger with a book or a glass of wine.

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real estate agent,  
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that **NOBODY ELSE WANTS**’”

—FRANCINE GARDNER

Evoking a European garden, the antique outdoor cafe table and chairs are anchored by a gravel patio. below: Chic lounge chaises from UNOPIU line the pool, which is surrounded in bluestone. opposite: In the sitting garden an outdoor canopy bed also by UNOPIU is the ultimate outdoor respite.






upholstered suede furnishings, meanwhile, have a mid-century modern appeal and are her own design (see [interieurs.com](http://interieurs.com)).

In a moment of candor, though, Francine admits that she actually prefers landscape design to interior design—and this site offered a fantastic outdoor canvas. The backyard contained a thick stand of dying pine trees that had to be taken down, leaving a giant copper beech to shade the house. A series of stone retaining walls were added to terrace the steep slope and direct rainwater into stone sluices that feed underground drywells. One terrace now houses an in-ground pool set in a bluestone surround and another became a

sitting garden complete with an all-season four-poster day bed.

Out front is the Old World plaza that provides a visitor's first impression of transatlantic shift. The building's horseshoe shape—designed to keep the animals penned in—serendipitously creates a courtyard that's much like you'd see in Europe. Francine planted a lush, spring garden full of climbing vines, ornamental grasses and specimen perennials. The choice of white gravel paving instead of a lawn was obvious, she says. "It's the French way." 

#### RESOURCES

*Interieurs*, 212-343-0800; [interieurs.com](http://interieurs.com)