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Country Elegance

By Kimberly Merritt

This time of year, I am drawn to a more relaxed interior, where flea market finds sit beside treasured antiques and the rough-hewn meets the refined. It's a casually elegant look that allows you to drag the crystal chandelier onto the deck, or bring a peeled-paint chest indoors. It's rooms filled with laughter and late night storytelling, not worrying about beach sand mixing with fine crystal, and when flower arrangements are picked straight from the field. I like to think country decorating just means "relaxed elegance". No need to get fussy; use what you love and have fun mixing it up.

Being able to put up your feet on well-loved pieces of furniture, while still achieving a sense of gracious living, is what it's all about. Choose classic-lined furnishings that will grow with you and your changing tastes. Furnishings with multi-purposes can be moved from room to room if need be, giving you a little extra for your decorating dollar. Select sturdy chairs for dining or extra seating in the living room or bedroom, use chests as coffee tables, and benches and ottomans for additional seating as well as impromptu tables in any room in the house. Now put your tag sale finds to good use and freshen them up with a bit of paint or a light sanding.

Mismatched china, a worn table, terracotta-potted flowers and grandma's silver all work wonderfully together. In fact, mismatched china has been in vogue forever, and is a welcomed addition to the well-dressed country home. You can find lovely china pieces at flea markets and tag sales to mix and match to your hearts content. There are no hard rules here - buy what you love and use it daily. The same holds true for crystal and silver. Buy bits and pieces because it speaks to you and not for its monetary value.

Collect vintage fabrics and use them for tablecloths, napkins, placemats, chair cushions, or toss one on a lampshade to give the room a soft glow. A large remnant works wonderfully as a chair or sofa slipcover, and at the end of a bed to add a splash of color and pattern to your room.

If you find an assortment of old wooden candlesticks, give them a coat of fresh paint to bring the collection together. Use lots of candles to give your rooms a warm glow. A nicely scented pillar on a flea market china plate is all you need. Lots of fresh flowers displayed in ceramic pitchers, glass jars or old teapots will add color and romance to your home.

Be creative and trust in your style.

The Thrill of the Hunt

By Kimberly Merritt

Turn your summer tag-sale savvy into flea market gold. Although you can find treasures for a bargain at your local tag sales, there's nothing a collector (or wanna-be collector) likes better than a great flea market. However, you really do need to be prepared in order to make the most of your shopping experience. Here are a few tips to get you started...

1. Dress Appropriately – Flea markets can be dusty and hot, so be sure you don't wear anything too precious. Dress in layers and wear good supportive shoes. Leave the jewelry and the big purse at home and instead opt for a light-weight carryall to stash money and personal items. Don't forget to wear a hat too.
2. What to Bring – If you know you're looking for something specific, make sure you have a small notebook on hand to list details like measurements and color preferences. Take along a tape measure to make sure whatever you choose fits the bill. In addition to plenty of cash (most dealers prefer cash) take a credit card or checkbook just in case. Bottled water is a must and a snack or two couldn't hurt. (Shopping bags and/or a rolling cart help with multiple or larger purchases.)
3. Ask for the Bargain – If you truly believe an item could be marked down, ask the dealer if this is their best price. (A 5%-10% discount is appropriate.) Don't try to haggle if the ticket says "firm" as this is the amount the dealer must have.
4. Collect what you Love – Collections should begin with the heart. Don't purchase something just because that's what everyone else is into. Furniture does sell first, so if that's what you're after, start there. (And go early.) You can find china plates, vintage jewelry, garden statuary, silver and vintage kitchen items for a decent price at most flea markets.