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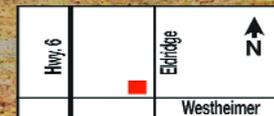


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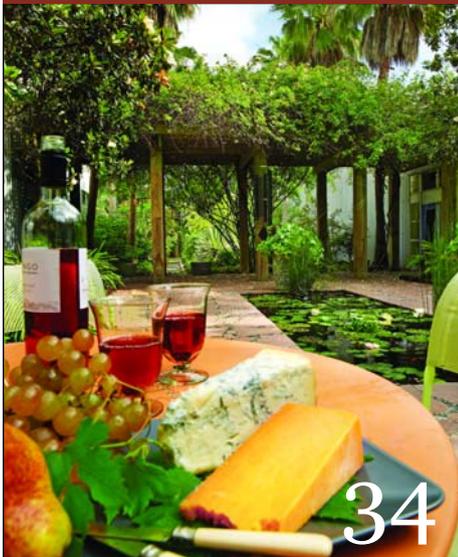
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On the Cover

The garden of food photographer Ralph Smith offers many earthly delights: a pristine pond, a rose-draped pergola and herbs and vegetables. It will be the setting for future FM 150 Farm to Table Dinners celebrating locally grown foods. See Page 34. *Food styling by Julie Hettiger of JH Creative. Photography by Ralph Smith*

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editor's note

Houston Chef Randy Evans wows me not only because he is a gifted cook but also because he's a walking Rolodex of Texas farmers' names and who's growing what and whose crop is in season when. After a fundraising event in the countryside last fall where Randy was one of the chefs, I sat down to breakfast with Randy and his wife Melanie and talk turned to Southern field peas. The Evanses are big fans of these down-home legumes, so we have something in common. I happen to think the Lady Cream Pea is the most sublime foodstuff on earth.

Well, Randy casually tossed off the name of at least five great field-pea growers and the variety of pea for which each is known (it wouldn't surprise me if he didn't know their cell phone numbers by heart). Then talk turned to Texas peaches, and he said he favors peaches from Fairfield north of Houston. He mentioned the varieties by name and riffed a bit on when each variety reaches perfect ripeness. He wasn't bragging, he was just politely answering my questions. Like every great cook knows, the source of the food is as important as the recipe and the technique used to cook it.

And so this spring, when I was invited to a mysterious little event called the FM 150 Farm to Table

Dinner where Randy was the presiding chef, I didn't hesitate to RSVP yes. The dinner was benefiting Urban Harvest, a great group of folks and was being held at an obscure address in Southwest Houston. I drove up to the building with palm trees in front, stepped inside and saw the garden that you are now seeing on the cover of this magazine. I grabbed the arm of PR woman Kimberly Park and said, "You have to tell me who did this garden."

She introduced me to Ralph Smith, the food photographer whose warehouse and garden it is. He is a soft-spoken Renaissance man who not only believes in gardening and eating locally grown food, but in sharing his knowledge. His photography speaks for itself. His garden has inspired me to try to grow more edible things in my little yard, and certainly to keep buying locally grown produce.

This fall, Randy and a group of co-owners will be opening a new restaurant, Haven, that will be serving food fresh from the farm.

I wonder if we know how fortunate we are to live in a place with a year-round growing season and people like Ralph and Randy who know how to make the best of it.

Linda Barth

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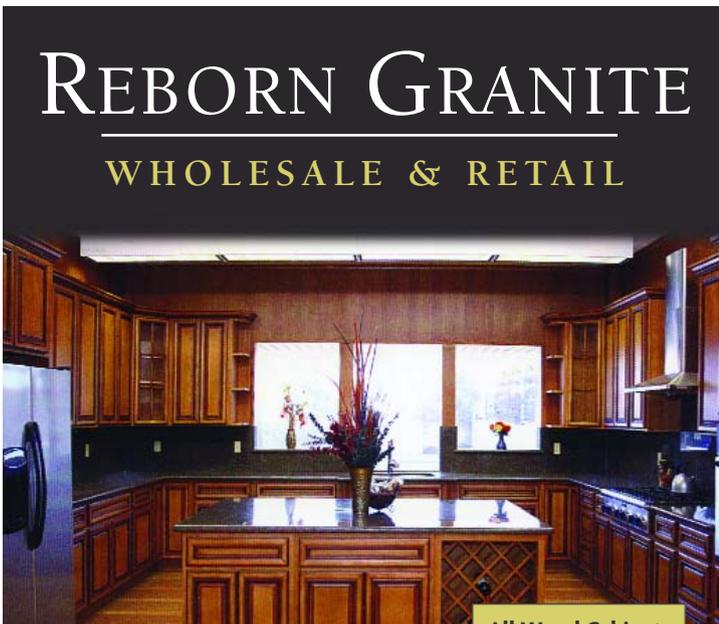
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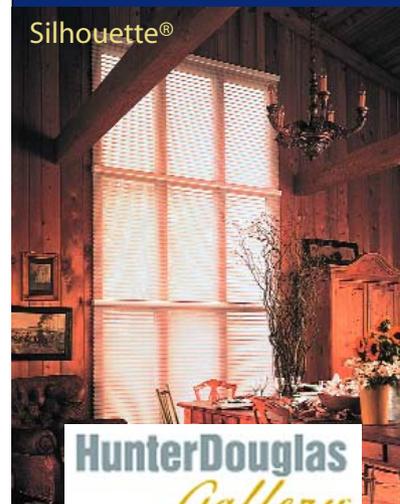
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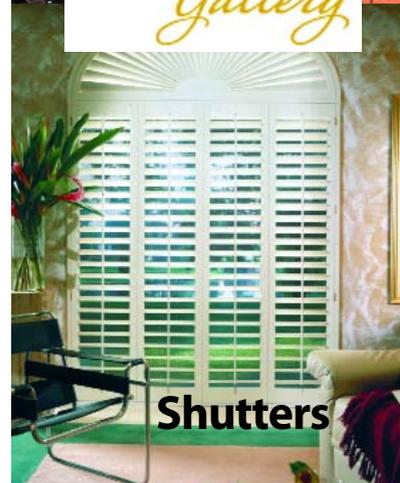
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home shows and tours

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events

Houston's Fourth of July celebration, **Freedom Over Texas with Fireworks Presented by Shell**, will honor the 40th anniversary of NASA's Apollo XI Lunar Landing on Saturday, July 4, from 4 p.m. to 10 p.m. The lively outdoor festival will feature a performance by country music star Clay Walker and the largest land-based fireworks show in the nation. Throughout the day, three stages will keep toes tapping with a variety of music. The family celebration will also include the Bud Zone Sand Volleyball Championship; Budweiser Beer Garden; NASA exhibits; Liberty Park featuring tanks and representation from all five branches of the military; and kids will stay entertained in the All American Kids Zone. Admission is free. Information: 832.393.0868 or www.freedomovertexas.org

The **First Saturday Arts Market** in the Heights moves to its summer night time hours this month, from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. every first Saturday of the month in the Wind Water Gallery parking lot at 548 West 19th St. information: 713.802.1213 or

www.FirstSaturdayArtsMarket.com.

exhibits

North Looks South: Building the Latin American Art Collection, opening June 7 at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH), celebrates the museum's major Latin American art acquisitions since 2001, with more than 80 works in every medium, ranging in date from the 1920s to the present. *North Looks South* is organized around unexpected juxtapositions between artists and works from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Mexico, Uruguay, the United States, and Venezuela. Rather than a traditional, chronological timeline, the exhibit is instead organized around the Latin American art movements: Constructivism, Kinetic and Op art, Surrealism, Latin Pop, installation art, and contemporary video. Information: 713.639.7500 or www.mfah.org

Houston Center for Contemporary Craft's **Literally Figurative** show focuses on the many aspects of the human figure—complex, beautiful, humorous, and quirky—as depicted by several craft artists through works made from ceramic, fiber, glass, metal, wood, or mixed media. These whimsical and offbeat objects demonstrate the conceptual and non-functional side of contemporary craft. Information: information: 713.529.4848 or www.craft-houston.org

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"Shark Car" photo by George Hixson, 1993, at the CAM Houston exhibit, "No Zoning: Artists Engage Houston."

ing residential, commercial, and industrial areas, Houston allows a mixed-use approach where disparate architectures and functions blend. In this often chaotic urban topography, many Houston artists have been able to carve out spaces and opportunities for themselves, their work, and their communities. **No Zoning: Artists Engage Houston** at Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, 5216 Montrose Blvd., is the first museum exhibition to consider the current and past efforts of regional artists working in the urban environment. *No Zoning* will include examples and documentation of important city interventions and visionary structures from the 1980s to the present. It will also present special programs during the museum's extended Thursday evening hours. Among the 18 artists and teams involved in the exhibition are The Art Guys; Mary Ellen Carroll; Rick Lowe, Ben Tecumseh DeSoto and KnittaPlease. Information: 713.284.8275 or www.camh.org

Marlene Dumas: Measuring Your Own Grave at The Menil Collection, 1515 Sul Ross, is the first mid-career survey of the Amsterdam-based artist's

work to be mounted in North America. *Measuring Your Own Grave* focuses on Dumas's continual experiments with notions of portraiture. The show ends June 21. Information: 713.525.9400 or www.menil.org

classes

Let your kids learn about nature at summer camp without leaving Houston. Houston Arboretum & Nature Center, 4501 Woodway, is holding **Nature Trekkers Summer Camps for kids 5 to 12**. The week-long classes offer hands-on learning experiences under the guidance of staff naturalists. Knot tying, orienteering, bug collecting (and releasing) and natural art and crafts are just a few of the activities. Camps topics include: "Winged Hunters," June 8-12 and July 13-17; "Lifelines," June 15-19 and July 20-24; "Outdoor Adventures," June 22-26 and July 27-31; "Bug Basics," June 29-July 3 or August 3-7; and "Wild Science," July 6-10 or August 10-14. Cost for full-day camp is \$230 for members; \$270 for non-members. Information: 713.366.0421 or www.houstonarboretum.org.

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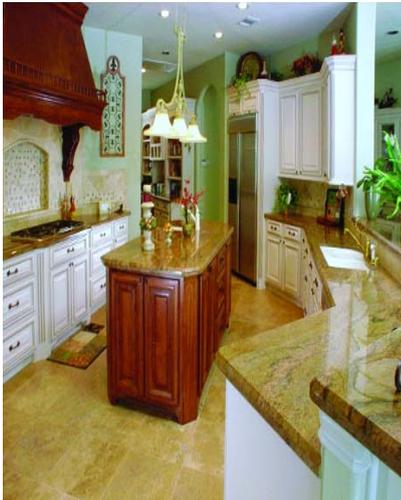


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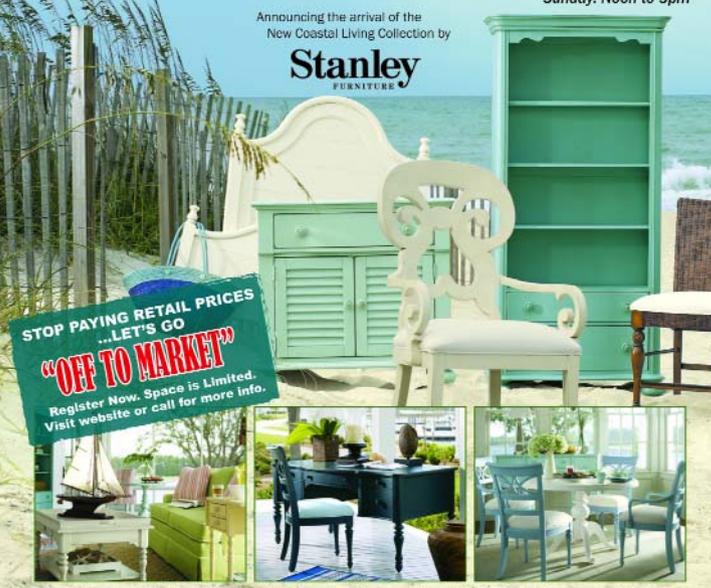
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AFTER

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Lethally Blond

BEFORE



AFTER (ABOVE): By recycling the existing sofa throw pillows, four down pillows were created to tie the sofa to the gold chairs. A larger custom red silk checked pillow was added for color. New Bruce wood flooring from Forsyth Floor Co., a seagrass rug, lamp and end really warmed up the room.

BEFORE (LEFT): The sofa looked dark and did not connect to the gold chairs. The blond furniture, carpeted floor and lack of lighting did not give the room the comfortable vibe the owners were after.

Susan and Keith Lynch's formal living room had become a storage room.

The couple walked past it, never using it. Although they had lived in their house for a couple of years, they had not made the living room feel like home. (See their dining room in *Houston House & Home*, "The Magic of Paint", February 2009).

"The blond furniture we moved from our Alaska home didn't seem to work in this house and had a matchy-matchy look", Susan explains. The room lacked color and personality and simply didn't feel good.

While they liked their furniture, the couple thought it seemed very formal and dated with its light finish. They wanted the room to have a more casual, inviting look so that they would really use the space. Susan and Keith really thought they needed to start from scratch but had no idea where to begin. "Since we were unsure about making changes, we didn't do anything at all," Susan says.

At our first meeting, I gave them a detailed list of tasks and resources they could complete on their own time schedule. Keith, an engineer, approached the shopping and painting tasks in a methodical manner, and the written list of homework assignments gave both him and Susan the confidence to make changes to the room without worrying too much about making costly decorating mistakes.

&

After learning Susan wanted to replace the carpet in the front room with Bruce engineered wood flooring to tie into the entry, I recommended she get another estimate from Forsyth Floor Co. This phone call saved the Lynches several hundred dollars over a previous estimate, which not only paid for my services, but some other costs incurred on the project.

tip Do get more than one bid when buying more costly furnishings—a simple phone call can save you lots of money.

First, the couple painted the walls a soothing yet colorful shade of green that flows with the rest of the house, Benjamin Moore “Nantucket Gray.” They began to see a major change in the room while they were painting. The room instantly felt better and the trim just “popped”, Susan reports.

tip Just because the furniture has always been one way doesn't mean you can't benefit from rearranging it...and this costs nothing.

Instead of starting over with new furnishings, I suggested first rearranging their furniture to create a more casual conversation area anchored by a casual, inexpensive seagrass rug, which defines the conversation area (“Seascape” from www.homedecorators.com). After careful measuring, I gave them the correct size rug to purchase, then recommended making new down throw pillows from the front and back of their existing sofa pillows to tie the sofa into the existing gold chairs. (Susan and I later met at Interior Fabrics to quickly select fabrics together, and to save money she took the pillow forms and fabrics to my workroom herself).

By adding a wall-hung flat screen TV to the wall opposite the sofa, I knew they would actually use the room. They had not thought about hanging a flat screen TV in the living room because they didn't think they had room for one. I provided them with the name of a reliable electrician to install the outlet, and Keith hung the TV. The top of an existing unused blond wood and iron coffee table (from the den) was transformed with Benjamin Moore “Otter Brown” #2137-10 paint. Its size is the perfect proportion for the existing Thomasville sofa and Ethan Allen chairs the couple bought many years ago.

Thanks to e-mail, we were able to send photos back and forth, and they found a round 24-inch end table from Home Source Warehouse and carved lamp from Target.com. “It was great e-mailing cell phone photos to you while we shopped—it allowed you to steer us in the right direction,” Susan says.

Keith was quite pleased that we displayed his hand-knotted rope balls in a Mexican terra cotta bowl on the lower shelf of the new table. To add texture to the walls, we hung the couple's Indonesian masks in a straight row in between the windows on the skinny wall space.

tip When hanging art, take the width of the wall space into account. A narrow wall between windows cries out for a vertical arrangement of small-scale artwork.

A larger wall can take larger pieces, hung low enough to relate to what they are hanging over or next to.

After seeing the couple's ethnic mask collection, I suggested another ethnic art-work touch—a trio of hand carved door transoms from Balinskas Architectural Import in the Heights. The couple bought the pieces they liked, and we literally laid them out on the floor via e-mail photos until we got it right.

tip To keep a room interesting, mix antique artwork and ethnic accessories with new fabrics and rugs.

“I truly appreciate the fact that all your rooms look different,” Susan says. “I could tell you were trying to help us create a look that suited our taste and lifestyle, rather than punch out a cookie cutter room.”

tip Having a professional look at your existing furnishings that are ‘already paid for’ saves money on replacements.

The couple still cannot believe that the gold Ethan Allen chairs they were ready to get rid of work so well in the room, and that adding some throw pillows could pull everything together so inexpensively. “The living room is now my favorite place to sit and grade papers or read a book. We did not expect to really love the room like we do.”

Homes of Distinction

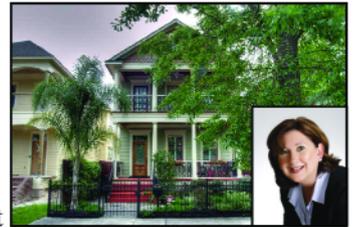
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AFTER

AFTER (LEFT): A small antique Chinese stool from Far Pavilions becomes an end table. The owners' Indonesian wood masks and a wall-hung flat screen TV make the room more functional. The owners painted the room Benjamin Moore "Nantucket Gray". A seagrass rug adds casual texture.

BEFORE (BELOW LEFT): A too-large blond coffee table, wall-to-wall carpet and lack of color, art or a TV made the formal living room a pass-by storage room.

AFTER (RIGHT): Hand-carved panels from Balinskas Architectural Import, a coffee table moved from another room (and painted), and earthy accessories—including the owner's hand-tied rope balls—make the room feel cozy.



BEFORE



BEFORE

BEFORE: The room seemed blank and empty and lacked accessories, color and style.

trade secrets

- **Think "green."** Rearranging furniture and adding inexpensive throw pillows can pull mismatched furniture together instead of replacing it—which keeps pieces out of the landfill and saves money, too.

- **Don't be afraid** to combine antique artwork and accessories with a new budget-friendly lamp, rug and table to create the room you have always dreamed of.

- Sometimes the most effective strategy is not to buy more furniture and accessories for your home, but to first **rethink the pieces that are already paid for.**

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THE POND TOUR



The Houston Pond Society and the Lone Star Koi Club are hosting the 2009 Water Garden and Pond Tour, Saturday and Sunday, June 6 & 7.

The self-guided tour of 30 residential water gardens and ponds throughout Harris County showcases water features ranging in size from small backyard garden ponds to high-tech koi ponds to huge multi-pond landscapes.

See show-quality koi, chubby fantail goldfish, blooming water lilies, playful dragonflies, cascading waterfalls and well-tended gardens. Chat with homeowners and get their tips about koi and other pond fish, pond maintenance and landscaping. Or, just come and sit awhile to experience the restful, serene effects of water gardens and ponds. Cameras are welcome, and there's even a photography contest.

Gardens and ponds can be toured both Saturday and Sunday June 6th and 7th, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tickets are \$10 for both days, and can be purchased at all participating homes. To find the home nearest you, see addresses below or visit www.houstonpondsociety.org or www.lonestarkoi.com. Buy advance tickets at Nelson Water Gardens in Katy, 1502 Katy-Fort Bend County Road, 281.391.4769. With your ticket, you get a brochure with a description of each pond, a map and detailed driving directions.

Since the ponds are spread over the greater Houston area, the tour is divided into two days; some ponds are open only on Saturday, and some only on Sunday. Be sure to note which ponds are open on which days, and plan your trip to see the ponds that interest you most.

Some are noted as koi ponds, which are typically deeper ponds and have few or no aquatic plants. If you have a passion for these beautiful fish, you may want to give priority to those homes.

Some tour sites are landscape features which highlight water lilies and other aquatic and garden plants with fish in the pond for an accent. If your passion is gardening/landscaping, you may prefer visiting these locations first. Some homes have it all—both koi ponds and landscape features. More information: 713. 822-5515. **Addresses for Pond Tour on Page 20** ▶

ABOVE This colorful backyard pond at 1622 Durfey Lane in Katy has been designated Certified Wildlife Habitat.



LEFT: McKinnon Associates created this serene landscape at 1102 Bartlett Street in the Museum District. Photo by Gaile Proler



ABOVE Lushly landscaped koi ponds at 7 Glade Bank Place in The Woodlands make the woods a semi-tropical paradise.



RIGHT: At 218 Leyden Court in Katy, a babbling brook flows into a goldfish pond ringed with tropical plants.

THE POND TOUR

& PONDS OPEN SATURDAY, JUNE 6, 10 A.M.-5 P.M.

7 Glade Bank Place, The Woodlands – This private paradise features two ponds with 26 koi and two goldfish, two waterfalls, a running stream and lush tropical landscaping.

1622 Durfey Lane, Katy – This habitat which the owners describe as “natural chaos,” includes a pond with waterfall, two streams and diverse landscape plantings. It has been certified as Certified Wildlife Habitat.

703 Briarpark Drive – Behind a ranch-style 1960s home, a garden oasis with two ponds and four waterfalls attracts birds and butterflies.

9330 Wandsworth Drive, Spring – Pond on small lot includes water lilies, six goldfish, trapdoor snails and one koi. Yard is Certified Wildlife Habitat.

3503 Lake Ridge Bend, Spring – A water garden/koi pond is the continuation of a small lake at the edge of the property; indigenous plants used in landscaping.

1527 Barraud Court, Katy – Primary pond with waterfall is home to koi, a second pond is habitat for goldfish. Landscape plantings attract hummingbirds and butterflies

7126 Northampton Way – Two dozen koi in a new pond that’s part of a larger swimming pool installation.

115 Speckled Egg Place, The Woodlands – A swimming pool and 40-foot-long fish pond blend visually, but the two water systems are separate.

26026 Mills Ridge Court, Humble – With limited yard space, a waterfall incorporated with a koi pond bubbles like a mountain stream amid lush landscaping.

218 Leyden Court, Katy – Large goldfish pond with two waterfalls complements natural landscaping that attracts wildlife.

1107 Martin St. – A 17-foot long pool provides good swimming room for the koi in this urban pond near downtown Houston.

139 Sandpebble Drive, The Woodlands – The bog, six waterfalls and a 6,000 gallon pond are home to 19 koi, one tiger shark pleco and a large plecostomus.

12035 Nova Drive – AquaCam built this pond in the home’s atrium. Koi and goldfish play hide and seek underneath flagstone shelves and water plants.

13619 Keneva Drive, Cypress – A three-tier pond system consists of two ponds and a bog. Eight koi live in one pond; the other contains lilies and water grass.

255 Vista Del Lago, Huffman – The owners, who’ve kept koi for more than 30 years, say their pond is “worth the 45 minutes drive from downtown if you are koi crazy.”

19410 Nehoc Lane, Humble – A water lily and goldfish pond led to the owner wanting a bigger, deeper pond for koi. The bottom of his new koi pond is roller-coastered to give the fish exercise.

PONDS OPEN SUNDAY, JUNE 7, 10 A.M.-5 P.M.

1871 Bending Stream Drive, League City – In this large pond on one acre, the koi all have names. Meet Tank, Big Mama, Rudolph and about 20 others.

15014 Torry Pines Road – A small pond holds 17 small goldfish and three koi, but the stars here are the water plants and landscape, which won a statewide bronze award from the Texas Nursery and Landscape Association in 2006.

1134 Oxford Drive, Pearland – A combination koi pond with waterfall and water garden with goldfish is home to 17 koi and “a bunch of goldfish.”

4005 Longwood Court, League City – Koi pond sits at the base of a dual stream waterfall descending from a berm banked by daylilies. Some goldfish-look for the blue-eyed red-lipped one.

2222 W. Lonesome Dove Drive, Deer Park – Natural pond covered with moss boulders, bull rock and pea gravel connects to 10-foot stream with waterfalls.

2313 Quiet Bay St., Pearland – Koi pond walls are covered with black plaster to contrast the fish; a moss rock waterfall doubles as filter.

16318 Pecan Drive, Sugar Land – Pond with koi and goldfish surrounded by varied landscape features and blooming annuals provides a focal point for this home’s patio.

1650 Neptune Lane – Large koi pond with rocks and waterfall takes up much of the backyard.

410 Llano St., Pasadena – Championship quality koi in a pond surrounded by ever-green plants and seasonal tropical plants.

1102 Barlett St. – Landscape architect Mark McKinnon of McKinnon and Associates created this serene Zen-inspired landscape in Houston’s Museum District. A 6-foot-deep pool is home to 12 Japanese koi.

7807 Fairway View Court, Sugar Land – Rainbow river rock and flagstone—11,000 pounds of it—were hand laid along this 25-by-12-foot koi and shubunkin pond by the owner and family members.

2502 Coastal Oak Drive – Goldfish swim in a 50-foot long meandering creek. Hardscape includes a pergola, bench swing and bridge.

5831 Tammy Drive, Marvel – Pond with 12 “jovial” koi is set amid five acres landscaped in tropical plants.

702 Mosby Circle – Behind a Queen Anne Style Painted Lady house, the backyard features Texas native plants, various gardens, an outdoor garden railroad and a pond and waterfalls.

5823 Spellman – Two koi ponds connected by a stream designed for natural wildlife habitat.

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One of the best things about living in Houston is that we can enjoy the outdoors year-round.

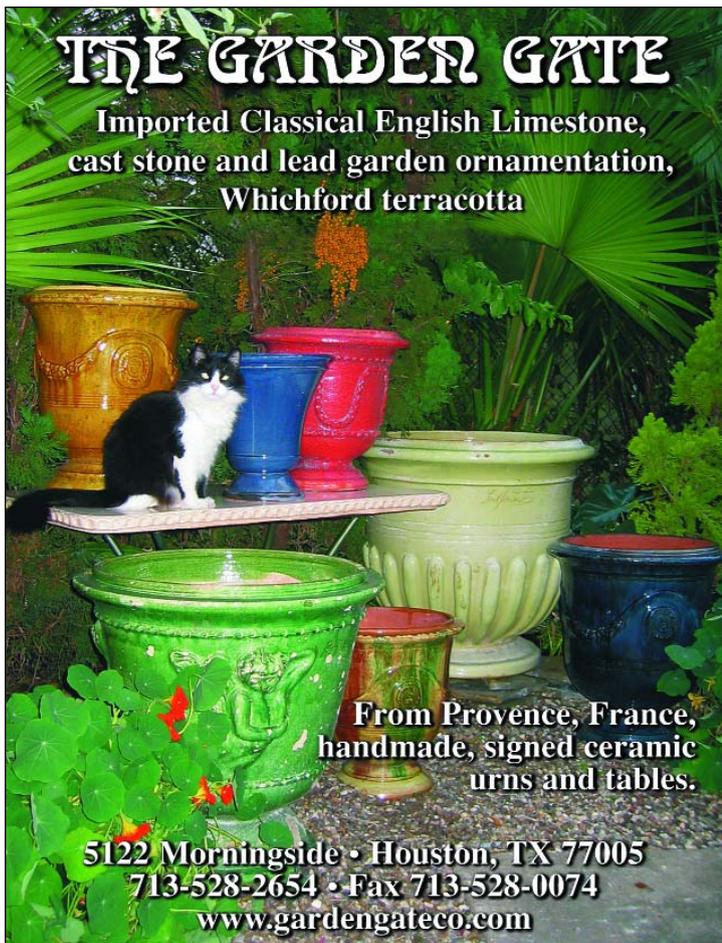
During our mild winters, most nights are ideal for enjoying an outdoor fire pit. Yes, summers are hot and humid, but that can be overcome with any number of creative solutions, such as covered patios, overhead fans, water misting systems and swimming pools.

"Nature refreshes, relaxes and soothes us. It is 180-degree opposite of modern technology," says Suzan Galvan, owner of In the Garden. "It is wonderful to come home from work and sit on your patio, hear the trickle of water, look at beautiful flowers, and listen to birds. You don't have to go far—it can be all right there in your own back yard." That is the appeal of outdoor spaces. ▶

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Paula Deen's warm Southern style on the Food Network translates to home furnishings, too, in her new home furnishings collection. This Turner Creek rug from Deen's collection is made of polypropylene so it won't mildew after a thunderstorm—or a gaggle of 3-year-olds sloshing lemonade on it. Available through Roberts Carpet & Fine Floors.



TAILOR YOUR DESIGN

When planning your outdoor living areas, Beverly Welch, owner of The Arbor Gate, says you should first ask yourself, “What do I want from the space?” Think about the sounds you might like to have—maybe a water element or plant materials, such as bamboo and grasses that rustle in the breezes. Consider adding fragrances with herbs, night-blooming jasmine or sweet olive. Welch likes almond verbena: “It can grow to the size of a tree, blooms for months and fills the air with a lovely almond scent.”

Consider when you'll be in your garden the most. “If you're like me,” Welch says, “I mainly get to enjoy my garden at night, so I've used lots of white in my landscape plantings. White catches the landscape lighting and moonlight.”

LEFT: For your outdoor kitchen, the GE Monogram Outdoor Cooking Center comes with three grill burners, rotisserie, smoker and rack. GE Monogram outdoor/indoor refrigerator module, shown at the far right. Local GE Monogram dealers include Gulf & Basco, K&N Builders Sales and Kiva Kitchen & Bath.

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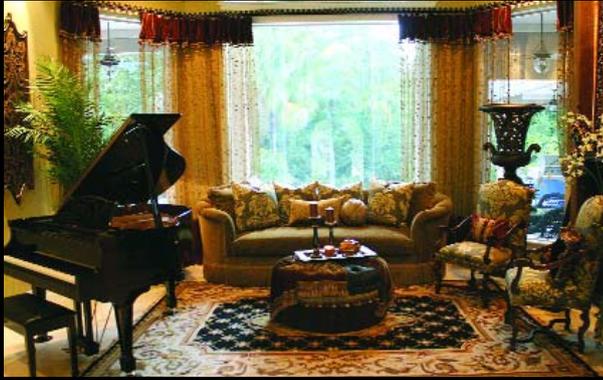
FURNISH IT COMFORTABLY

Other ideas to help you create a very special outdoors space:

- "I like the vintage furniture from the 30s and 40s," says Galvan. "It has a charm that can change the whole feel of a home." In stock at In the Garden, 4- and 6-chair vintage table sets from France, Argentina and Germany.
- In its 2009 collection, Brown Jordan, the California-based manufacturer of high-end leisure furniture, showcases its sleek Madrid set of outdoor furniture. A herringbone weave over a powder-coated aluminum frame simulates the look of saddle leather. Tailored cushions complement the look. The effect is curvaceous, elegant and ready-made for outdoor living. Brown Jordan has recently opened a to-the-trade showroom at Decorative Center Houston.
- See Smith & Hawken for gazebos, pavilions and other garden structures. The Modular Gazebo is made of weather-resistant 4mm wire in a trellis design perfect for climbing roses or flowering vines; the Vista Pavilion, a pergola-style design made of cast aluminum and tubular steel, has a retractable Sunbrella awning.
- Jaclo offers a luxurious outdoor shower pole made of stainless steel. When not in use, it resembles a garden sculpture. It's just the thing for poolside showering or a refreshing splash after gardening chores.
- Kathy Stratton, owner-buyer at C&D Hardware, recommends yard accessories that attract birds and butterflies, such as bird feeders made of art glass. "When you put elements into your yard, you want to add things that make you smile and turn your yard into a happy place," she says.



&



Summer is a great time to get your decorating "to do" list done before the busy fall season.

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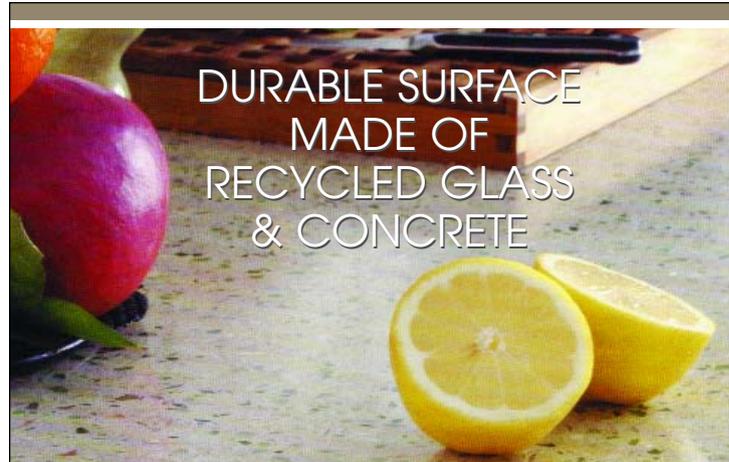
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Want the home court advantage? Install sports or play equipment at your home.

Whether it's a swing set and play equipment for the kids, or a putting green for Mom and Dad, sport systems for outdoor play at home are becoming a desired amenity for active people and their families. Play equipment draws neighborhood kids. Adults enjoy improving their skills on putting greens or basketball or bocce ball courts.

Another advantage to play courts is health and fitness. If you want to lure your kids away from the TV and computer games and encourage them to be more active, outdoor sports courts and play systems are a good way to do it.

Even the smallest of yards can accommodate these courts. Prices generally start around \$7,500, depending on the size and condition of the yard.

With outdoor play equipment, adults can have plenty of fun, too. Sport Court of Houston builds outdoor multi-purpose courts geared for kids of all ages. Made of snap-down tiles that sit on top of concrete, this flooring creates a cushion that acts as a shock absorber. Thus, aging muscles and joints can play longer, harder and safer.

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Green Links Inc. based in Houston designs and installs synthetic turf golf putting greens, playgrounds and bocce ball and other game courts and playgrounds in Texas and Louisiana.

The use of synthetic turf for residential backyards is increasing in popularity, says Terry Westbrook, president and owner of Green Links. It's easy to maintain and when not in use for games or sports, it looks like a beautiful green lawn. "For some families with small homes, the putting green doubles as a play area for children," Westbrook says. "You treat it like a lawn."

The smallest size area for a putting green, he estimates, might be 25 feet by 10 feet. Costs range from \$7,400 to \$25,000, he says, depending on size and landscaping. "If you do it right, you really create a setting around it so it's more inviting."



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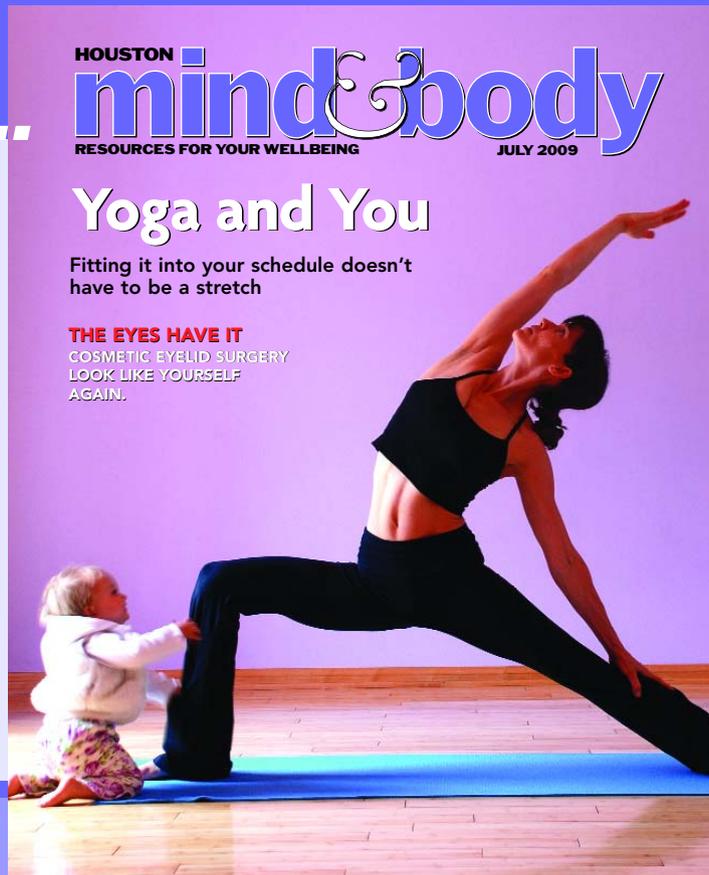


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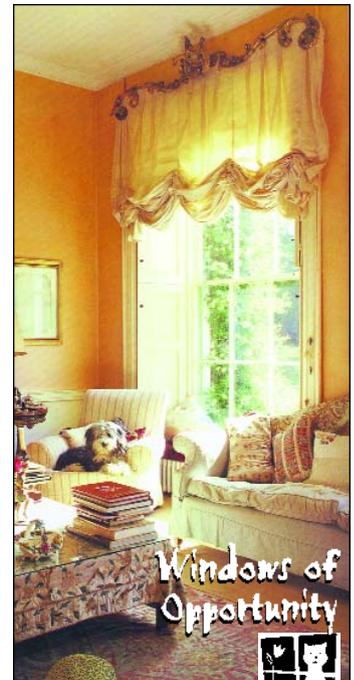


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ABOVE: The focal point of the main patio is a goldfish pond installed by Nelson Water Gardens. "It's easy to maintain," says Smith, who releases tadpoles into the water so he'll have frogs on his lily pads.

OPPOSITE: Photo stylist Julie Hettiger loves working in this kitchen at the studio, she says, because it captures natural light so well. Large windows frame views of the garden with its tall palms chosen to lend a tropical vibe to the landscape.

Secret Garden

Story by Linda Barth • Photography by Ralph Smith • Food styling by Julie Hettiger

In a Southwest Houston neighborhood of warehouses and townhouses, a hidden garden of herbs, vegetables and tropical flowers delights the senses

The entry courtyard enclosed by a yellow stucco wall suggests you are entering a temple of minimalism. The ground is thickly covered in gravel, not a blade of grass in sight. The only hints something exotic might lie beyond are seven tall palm trees, their sky-high hula skirts of spiky leaves swaying flirtatiously in the breeze.

An oval entry room directs you to the doorbell, and when the door opens, you step inside a gallery where floor-to-ceiling glass frames a stunning panorama of one man's private paradise. The

garden of Ralph Smith is marvel of texture, color, scent, water sounds and, perhaps most of all, taste. Herbs, vegetables and edible flowers tucked here and there in the landscape, please eye, nose and tongue. It is a garden designed to nurture edible plants and stimulate the senses.

As if the palms, blooms and edible greenery weren't enough, a large rectangular goldfish pond in the main patio brings sparkle and the burble of water to the landscape. Blooming water lilies and submerged grasses keep the pond crystal clear, ►

&





Colorful goldfish and the soothing sound of water bring a sense of peace to the central patio's pond.



Pink mallow blossoms and blue salvia.

all the better to see the long-tailed goldfish drift lazily in the water.

While the garden's hardscape of flagstone, crisply edged gravel trails and wooden pergola is neatly symmetrical and provides order, the plants are allowed their freedom. "Chaos within symmetry," says Smith, is the underlying aesthetic of the landscape design.

WHO LIVES HERE?

Many visitors ask, "Who lives here?" The garden feels residential, and could work beautifully for a home, but it is not residential. Located in a nondescript neighborhood of warehouses and townhouses in Southwest Houston, the building and its gardens are the headquarters of Ralph Smith Photography, nationally noted for fine food photography.

Food manufacturers, grocers, restaurateurs, publishers and their ad agencies fly from all over the country to Houston to have Smith photograph luscious foodstuffs for their food packaging, menus and advertisements. Many of the fresh greens, vegetables, flowers and garnishes you see in his photographs come from this very garden.

He enjoys entertaining his clients from northern climes here. When product managers, ad execs and art directors from Manhattan, Minneapolis or Cleveland arrive in, say, February, they shed their heavy overcoats and breathe a sigh of relief to sit under the palms in the sun. The place is a living picture postcard in praise of Houston's 365-day growing season.

&

While the garden serves Smith's distinct business purposes, it also serves as a model for the rest of us. It is a valuable study in how organically grown edible plants in an urban Houston landscape can not only nourish us but also look gorgeous.

MAKE IT EDIBLE

Smith has been a food photographer in Houston for almost 30 years; his current office and garden complex is only about 10 years old. "This place is way different from my old studio," Smith says. "The old one was dark."

The idea of having a garden at his new offices was Smith's brainchild, but he wisely enlisted the help of two great designers: Houston architect Natalye Appel for design of the building and The Office of James Burnett for landscape design.

"I'm primarily a food shooter," Smith says. "My idea for the garden was to have just fresh herbs—some basil or sage—and small flowers and things like that you can garnish a plate with. Fig leaves or dark green leaves or light green leaves. It's just so fresh."

Appel loved the idea of having a "warehouse-kind of facility" surround and embrace the gardens. "The gardens are one of the primary reasons for the building's form,"

RIGHT: A large bowl holds a mini-water garden at the entry to the building..

BELOW: A shy squash begins to unfurl its bloom in the potager north of the pergola.





Appel says. “When you first walk up and see the stucco wall, you can tell from the street there’s this kind of secret garden effect. It’s like a hidden jewel in a sea of metal warehouses.” Almost every room in the complex has large windows or doors that allow natural light and views of the garden.

“A huge part of [Smith’s] garden is being able to utilize it for his work,” says Chip Trageser, landscape architect and principal of Burnett’s firm. When designing Smith’s landscape, “We did think about foodstuffs,” Trageser says. “If done right, you can use herbs and vegetables as an aesthetic, with textures, colors and you get the added benefit of being able to use the material.”

In Smith’s garden now, Julie Hettiger of JH Creative, the food stylist who works closely with him, regularly harvests herbs, leaves and blooms from the garden with tweezers and scissors.

“You can’t always get exactly what you’re looking for,” Smith says, “but probably quite often, probably a better variety than what you do at the store. That was the thought behind this garden.”

GROWING TIPS

You get the sense that Smith would’ve wanted a garden at his office whether or not he uses the plants to photograph or to eat. “I like gardening,” he says. “It’s like an artist’s palette. It’s not a whole lot different than what I do here (with photography). You start with bare canvas and you have colors and textures and shapes and forms that you work with. You try some things. If doesn’t work, you don’t do it again.”

The inspiration for this garden was a trip to Italy taken years ago before the new office was designed. Smith and his wife attended a cooking school at Villa Ferraia in Tuscany. “They had a garden that was probably almost an acre,” Smith says. “The main thing I got out of that cooking school is just eat what’s fresh. That’s basically what they do. Their recipes are very simple. They liter-

LEFT: At the end of a hallway, a window frames a view of a magnificent agave.

&

ally get up in the morning and go out to the garden. We didn't know what we were going to cook until we went out into it."

Smith generally doesn't plant in straight rows. "I have a different theory than most gardeners," he says. He plants wherever he thinks a certain plant needs to be. If it doesn't thrive, or gets mildew or insects, he cuts it out and destroys it—no pesticides. Everything is organic and natural.

He's a strong believer in MicroLife soil conditioner and uses only Nature's Way products. "The main thing I've learned is that it all starts in the soil," he says. You've got to have good soil. I'd rather put a weak plant into good soil than a good plant into poor soil. It's going to die. It's not going to make it."

A good compost pile is the building block of the garden. "I don't think you need to fertilize," he says. "Eventually if you use compost enough, it corrects everything." He is aided in the care of his office garden by his brother, Tom Smith, of Southern Magnolia Landscaping.

Smith has become a firm believer in the value of edible plants in urban landscapes. His home in Garden Oaks is a half and half mix of edible and nonedible plants.

FARM AND CITY

Growing edible plants in an urban landscape is a concept being revived in modern America. Over the past couple of centuries, sometime after the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, growing edible plants in urban landscapes became unfashionable. People flocked to the cities to escape the farm and make higher wages with less back-breaking labor. Yards in the city and close-in suburbs were for green lawns and hedges, not potato patches. Window boxes were for geraniums, not oregano. Food was to be purchased neatly packaged at the grocer's, not plucked from the dooryard. Park land was for recreation, not farming. ▶

RIGHT: Covering the tall wooden pergola is a climbing Old Rose plant purchased at Buchanan's Native Plants. "It didn't do much the first couple of years," says Smith. Then, it grew and bloomed profusely. Tall plants in pond are equisetum and nasturtiums.





Urbanites, whether fresh off the turnip truck or several generations into the city, sought to separate themselves from rural life not only psychologically but physically with the plants they chose. Growing food, especially in the front yard, was for hicks. By the 1950s, many American subdivisions had deed restrictions prohibiting food plants from being grown in the yard, and many still maintain those restrictions.

In the 1960s, eating natural foods became the rage. Later, higher ener-

gy prices, climate change and worries about sustainable methods of farming and food production helped revive the concept of eating locally grown foods and keeping home gardens. (Edible urban gardens have always been acceptable in parts of the world like China where the cities of Beijing and Shanghai grow almost all their own vegetables locally.)

Urban Harvest, a nonprofit organization dedicated to using fruit, vegetable and habitat gardens to improve quality of life in the Houston area,



ABOVE: Tucked in a back corner of the garden is a swimming pool with shallow beach entry. "I don't know what came over me," says Smith, with a chuckle. "We've shot photos around it a few times. It's mainly ambience."

FAR LEFT: In the front parking lot, a patch of bluebonnets reminds springtime visitors they're in Texas.

LEFT: Detail of variegated agave.



has long promoted the concept of eating locally. Its Bayou City Farmers Market, 3000 Richmond at Eastside, has been highly successful in promoting local produce.

So strongly does Smith believe in urban gardening, growing food locally and supporting family farms, he started the The FM 150 Farm-to-Table Dinner Series to promote food grown by local farmers within 150 miles of Houston. This spring, he hosted the first dinner for 90 peo-

ple at his garden to raise funds for Urban Harvest. Chef Randy Evans prepared the dinner with farm-fresh locally grown foods.

Smith plans to host more fund raising dinners at his garden. The next is scheduled tentatively for November. Check www.smithphoto.com for information about future FM 150 dinners so you can stroll these splendid gardens yourself, learn from them, dine on really fresh foods and perhaps become inspired to plant a little parsley in your petunia patch.



ABOVE: The garden awaits the FM 150 Dinner celebrating fresh food grown within 150 miles of Houston. Chef Randy Evans of the soon to be open Haven restaurant cooked a multi-course dinner here as a fundraiser for Urban Harvest. Smith plans more fundraising dinners to encourage eating local foods.

RIGHT: A firecracker bush leaves its blooms in the gravel path.

FAR RIGHT: No straight farmer's rows for this garden. In the foreground, sage and salvia. Behind them, tomatoes.



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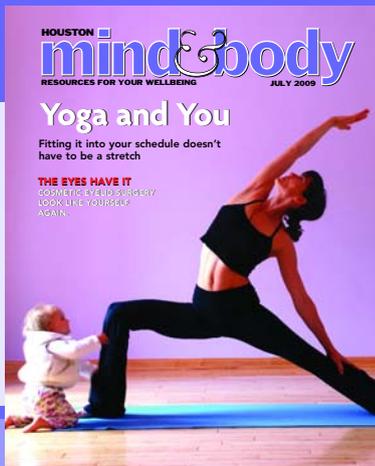


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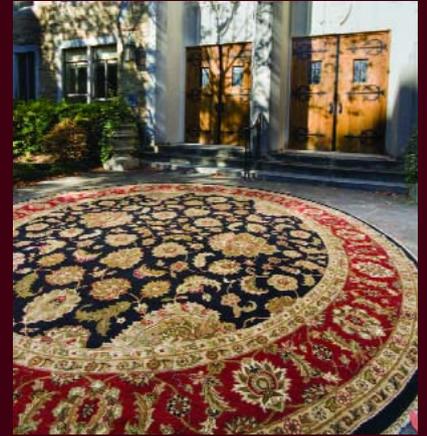
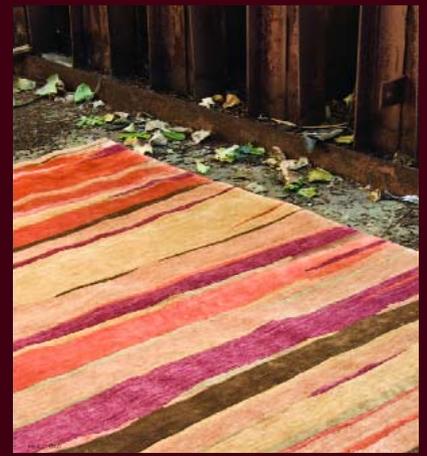
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* The financing options are available only for the purchase and installation of the Lennox™ Residential Generator on approval of credit from GE® Money Bank. Additional heating, cooling, and/or indoor air quality equipment and installation costs are not eligible to be included in the transaction. Using 18-month financing offer on promo purchase, no monthly payments required & no finance charges assessed if (1) promo purchase paid in full in 18 months, (2) any minimum monthly payments on account paid when due. Otherwise, promo may be terminated & finance charges assessed from purchase date. As of 06/25/08, variable APR is 18.9%; delinquent accounts, 26.99%. Minimum finance charge \$1.50. Using 60-month financing offer on promo purchase, fixed monthly payments equal to 1.98% required, and finance charges will be applied to promo balance at the reduced APR of 6.90% if (1) promo purchase paid during promotional period, (2) any minimum monthly payments on account paid when due, and (3) account balance does not exceed credit limit. Otherwise, promo may be terminated.

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