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Wyndmoor couple in love with old house's possibilities

By Kathleen Nicholson Webber
For The Inquirer

When Maria Hasenecz sees a mess, she doesn't see chaos; she sees possibilities.

The daughter of a builder, she watched her mother move into house after house surrounded by dirt piles, and she tagged along with her father to job-site inspections. The turmoil of a house (or a garden) under construction never scared her.

Quite the opposite.

Eleven years ago, when Maria and her husband, George, outgrew their Center City house, they headed for Wyndmoor to find more space - especially room where she could throw herself into her gardening.

The 1890 stone farmhouse they stumbled upon one day had been dormant for years. It was dilapidated and had no redeeming qualities in the landscaping department.

In other words, perfect.

"I fell in love with the falling-apart front porch and the carriage house," says Maria Hasenecz, president of Livable Landscapes, a residential design firm.

Later, at the kitchen island, she flips through before-and-after photos of the entire property. As with many renovations, there is always one more project waiting for the owners to get their second wind (or third). For Maria and George Hasenecz, it was the carriage house.

This summer, they gave it a makeover, and it has become the space where Maria spends much of her day - experimenting, planning her next design, or entertaining.

But during the many years of work on the main house, the carriage house was more like a warehouse.

The kitchen cabinets spent time in storage there, as did tools used in such projects as repointing stone, reinforcing joists, reconfiguring rooms, installing a fireplace (George's one must-have), installing central air conditioning, and rebuilding that sagging front porch that sold Maria in the first place.

After Maria left her job as a manager at SunGard and opened Livable Landscapes in 2003, she demonstrated her gardening handiwork to clients by showing them her own backyard.

Inevitably, they would stumble upon the ugly-stepsister stone carriage house still waiting its turn on the punch list.

Though its exterior was easy on the eyes, its interior wasn't.

Clients "were always enchanted by the gardens, and then we'd end up near the carriage house and I would be embarrassed that it was a jumbled mess, because I am an organized person," she says.

This year, a summer garden party was the final impetus to get the structure back in shape. The square building needed a new roof and cupola windows, and its interior had to be power-washed and painted.

In a month, Maria had the space decorated and party-ready.

"I design and work quickly. Once I have my ideas, I like to get going."

Atop the structure is a housewarming gift from her parents: a copper quail weathervane. Inside, George and Maria have placed treasures from their collecting, pieces that are functional, rustic and charming.

Four new lantern-style light fixtures in copper hang from the ceiling, over a walnut farm table that once was at the Doylestown Tavern (they found it at Zionsville Antiques). The table is artfully set with books and tools, terrariums, stoneware containers filled with moss and pine cones, and urns with twigs and bark.

A seven-foot-tall painted blue cabinet from Lavender Hill in Chestnut Hill holds pots and potting soil. A pine hutch that Maria found in Center City holds everything from fertilizer to urns, plus an exotic antique birdhouse.

An old metal medicine cabinet holds their many battery chargers, and a small wooden cabinet hides an unsightly power box. A primitive wooden toolbox sits on top of an antique desk; in the box, there are garden tools and jam jars filled with fish food.

A gurgling pond is within earshot and is flanked by gnarled azalea-root chairs where Maria, George, and their guests often linger after dinner.

"I always enjoy when we have visitors, because they make me appreciate what we have here," says George Hasenecz. "Sometimes, when you see this every day, you can take it for granted. They force me to view it in a different light."

His wife agrees.

"It is so enjoyable to be out there now," she says of the carriage house. "I am literally out there every day, making containers for clients or retrieving tools for our own garden. It is amazing how much environment can change your mood."

But for Maria Hasenecz, there is always more tweaking to be done in the outdoor spaces. On a recent weekend, she decorated a small side porch, giving it a colorful Asian bent.

Next up is a seating area near the pond made with stone culled from their kitchen re-do. The retreat will include a fire pit, hand-carved Balinese chairs, and plantings that pop with color. The crew is set to begin any day now, and Maria says she can't wait for the digging to begin.

The dirt, the chaos, the possibilities!



BONNIE WELLER / Staff Photographer
Inside the carriage house at the Hasenecz home in Wyndmoor. For years, they used it for storage while lavishing their attention on the rest of the property.

Before they signed the papers on the house, she asked the sellers if they could plant eight shrubs. And so the roots were buried for a garden that is now a living, breathing portfolio of her design talents.

On a warm morning, as butterflies enjoy the bushes she has installed for them, Hasenecz fires off the Latin names of the plants in her garden, extolling the virtues of each. She plucks off the loose bark of a crape myrtle tree, to be stored in a bowl in the carriage house for more study.