



A courtyard behind the house yields breathtaking views of the canal and wetlands beyond. Great efforts were made to protect the trees on the property; a "floating" deck punctuated by persimmon trees creates an island amid grasses and paths strewn with clam shells.

# WETLANDS IDYLL

A design team seamlessly integrates an eco-friendly vacation home with its peaceful Rehoboth Beach locale

BY JULIE SANDERS  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN COLE



**A** Bethesda couple had fallen in love with Rehoboth Beach years before they decided to buy a vacation home there. Children in tow, they made the trek each summer to savor the wide, sandy beaches and quaint downtown strip.

When their four kids were grown, they finally purchased a property on the Lewes and Rehoboth Canal that held a cottage with a vista of pristine wetlands. They wanted something small enough for two, but large enough to keep the family coming back. “We lived there on our vacations for three years to see if it worked,” recounts the wife. “But there was just not enough space when the kids were visiting.” In fact, the abode was too small even for the husband and wife; a litigator and law professor respectively, they needed space to work.

So they contacted architect Amy Gardner, whose practice focuses on building sustainably—a major priority for the couple. The idea was to renovate, but it quickly became clear that tearing down the dated, uninsulated cottage and starting afresh made more sense.

Gardner and project architect Brittany Williams traveled to Rehoboth and spent time observing the couple’s lifestyle and the way their current house worked—and didn’t. The new home’s sustainable elements would “focus on passive strategies to decrease energy demands,” says Gardner. Geothermal heating and cooling, a high-performance building envelope and an energy-recovery ventilator would minimize costs, while operable windows and skylights—particularly in the open stairway—allowed for natural



**A driveway paved in shells (opposite, bottom) leads to the glassed-in front entry. The L-shaped design of the house is clear from the rear view (opposite, top). A spacious kitchen/dining area (top) easily accommodates family gatherings; the screened porch (above) is visible through sliding-glass doors beyond.**

ventilation. Reclaimed and recycled materials and LED lighting were also part of the package.

“The first challenge was how to orient the house on the site,” Gardner recalls. “The water is to the west, and that is the hottest, least pleasant exposure.” She and Williams conceived an L-shaped abode that faces west to maximize views of the canal and wetlands, but is buffered by a courtyard shaded beneath carefully preserved trees and sheltered from the wind.

Integrating the stunning natural scenery into the design was another challenge. “We wanted to ensure that the home would engage fully with the outdoors,” says Gardner, who designed a glassed-in entry foyer that connects the two wings of the house and opens out to the backyard. “It’s a continuous view from the street side through the foyer and out to the canal and marsh,” she explains. Walls of windows on the canal side frame views to the courtyard and beyond, and a boardwalk deck offers a transition from the house to the outdoors. The 3,600-square-foot house is sited as close to the canal as permitting would allow, making the water views more dramatic.

ARCHITECTURE: AMY E. GARDNER, FAIA, LEED AP, principal; BRITTANY WILLIAMS, AIA, LEED AP, project architect; Gardner Mohr Architects LLC, Silver Spring, Maryland. KITCHEN DESIGN: JENNIFER GILMER, CKD, Jennifer Gilmer Kitchen & Bath, Ltd., Chevy Chase, Maryland. BUILDER: ROBERT PURCELL, Beachwood, Inc., Showell, Maryland. LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE: HOLT JORDAN, ASLA, PLA, Jordan Honeyman, Washington, DC.

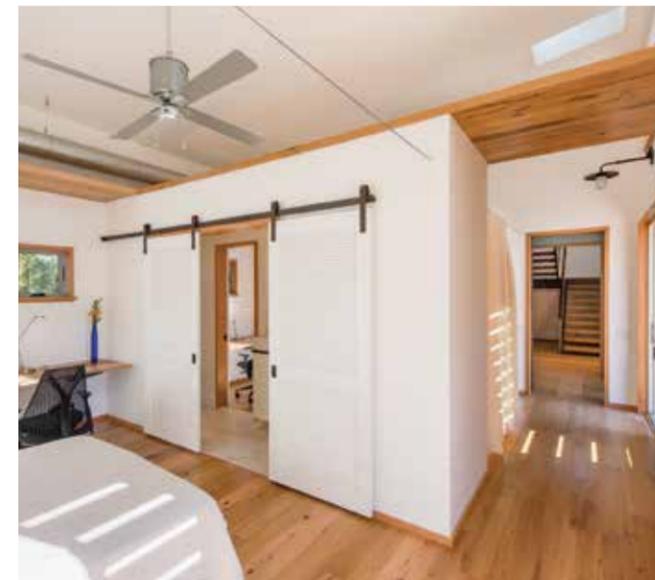


The owners tapped landscape architect Holt Jordan to enhance the connection between the house and its setting. “The idea was to celebrate the canal and the marsh,” Jordan says of his overall plan. “We used existing persimmon trees to tie the landscape to its location and floated a deck so the trees are coming out of it.”

In lieu of a traditional lawn, native grasses are planted all over the property, punctuated by ornamentals and framed by paths of crushed clam shells surrounding slabs of bluestone.

The two-story main wing houses the open-plan kitchen/living/dining room with the master suite above. The other wing—christened “the bunkhouse”—holds two bedrooms (one doubles as the husband’s office) with a shared bath. The name “bunkhouse” derives from the fact that the bedrooms are open on one side, facing glass doors leading to the courtyard with only heavy canvas curtains for privacy. “It drove my kids crazy when they were here last,” remarks the wife, laughing, “but I love the openness.”

While sustainability was a given, the couple was less sure about the direction they wanted the house to take in terms of style. After poring over pictures online, the wife “focused on a ‘rustic modern’ look,” she says. “I like simplicity, so we tried to keep it simple.” Cedar shingles and siding on the exterior convey a farmhouse sensibility, while expanses of glass keep it modern. A cedar-and-steel pergola covers the boardwalk, which is made of a durable hardwood called machichi. Motorized rollout shades on the pergola can be lowered to shield the interiors from the sun, and slatted cedar barn doors slide over the glass doors to the bunkhouse. “We



The back of the house (opposite, top) is elevated on four-foot pilings to guard against flooding from the canal; marsh grasses and surrounding permeable ground cover provide the same service. The two wings of the house intersect at the front entry (opposite, bottom), where a barn door opens to “the bunkhouse” wing. There, the bedrooms are delineated by a slab of Douglas fir above the passageway; another barn door conceals a shared bath (above). The open living area (top) lies in the other direction, just past the stairs.

were looking for elements that move, to change the light in the space,” Gardner explains.

Inside, a natural material palette combines rugged reclaimed-oak floors with spare, stainless-steel stair railings and Douglas fir woodwork. Gardner and Williams collaborated with Jennifer Gilmer on a kitchen design that perfectly reflects the wife’s “rustic modern” preference. Two cabinet styles—one resembling textured barn wood and the other a sleek, gray wood surface—are framed in hot-rolled steel that conveys the look of industrial-style furniture. Expanses of exposed ductwork and open shelving unify the kitchen and sitting area, while beyond the dining area, a spacious screened porch beckons.

Upstairs, the airy master suite is accessed via a passageway with a built-in, reclaimed-oak desk 16 feet long that easily accommodates several workspaces. Overlooking the canal on two sides, the master bedroom boasts a vaulted ceiling embellished by Douglas fir beams suspended on steel rods. For continuity, all the baths feature marble-look porcelain-tile surfaces and Douglas fir vanities topped with quartz countertops and basin sinks by Scarabeo.

The architects helped the wife outfit the house with clean-lined furniture from Ligne Roset, keeping the rooms spare so as not to detract from the view. “I love the wetland,” says the wife. “It’s spectacular and changes all the time. The sunsets are incredible.” ❖

Photographer John Cole is based in Silver Spring.

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A passageway with a built-in desk made of reclaimed oak (opposite) leads to the master-bedroom suite. From the bedroom, a picture window offers a view of the pergola and courtyard (below). The master bath features floating Douglas fir vanities (above) and a sleek, modern tub with a porcelain-tile surround (right).





“We wanted to ensure that the home would fully engage with the outdoors.” —AMY GARDNER

Native grasses and ornamental plantings embellish the backyard, where a dock gives the homeowners a spot for launching kayaks on the canal.