

Decorating at the farm

Home and Gardens – New York Times
26 June, 2011

A⁻ A⁺
Share

[> Comment on this story](#)



A "fire element" in a field is a gas hearth that can be switched on or off, like lighting a grill is a nice entrée to the two Cape Cod glass greenhouses from [BC Greenhouse Builders](#).

To see more photos, click [here](#).

NYT

BULGER, Pennsylvania – At the Farm, iron chairs wear mink coats, candelabras sprout from picnic tables, and crystals hang from the trees. Despite these bedazzlements, the property – 61 rolling hectares 15 minutes from downtown Pittsburgh – is not exactly Pennsylvania's version of the Petit Hameau. Yes, some of the rocks are spray-painted silver, but the filmy white curtains framing a rough-hewn sofa in the woods overlooking a stream are rot-resistant and will flutter there in all weather.

"It's survival of the fittest," said Esther Dormer, a founder of the Future Fund, a venture capital firm, who bought the place 11 years ago as a second home with her husband, Brian Dormer, an airline pilot. The two, both 51, live in a Pittsburgh suburb 30 minutes away. "We plant and go," she said. "We never mulch, and if something can't cut it – a plant, the dogs, the fabric on the furniture – it's out. We can't be fussy here."

It was a blisteringly hot afternoon, and the pollen was blowing through the barn, a genuine Amish number spiffed up with a collection of atmospheric cement balls, a reproduction Morse-code signal lamp, 30 silver

folding chairs hanging from weathered iron spikes, a 7-metre-long table made from salvaged wood and a pool table covered in hammered, studded aluminium.

In the corner, a Chesterfield sofa wore cognac-coloured python-print vinyl, which is mouse- and mold-proof, as noted by Lisa Dagnal, a 43-year-old self-taught designer whose only client is Esther Dormer.

It was Dagnal whom Dormer turned to three years ago for decorating help.

"I have this farm," she said. "It could look a lot better."

Dagnal's first job was to polish up the barn's downstairs office. She and Darrell Frey, a laconic permaculture expert and property manager who is the Farm's resident philosopher and facilitator, covered its ductwork in moss and birch bark.

"These ladies do like to pose design problems," he said.

The Farm has not always been so camera-ready. (About its name: Dormer prefers titles that are descriptive rather than sentimental. There are no gazebos – "That word reminds me of the place that's covered in red, white and blue next to where you get ice cream in the summer," she said – but there are five "view houses.") When she and her husband bought the land, it was a fallow graveyard for old appliances and a pasture for cattle.

Dormer, "a suburban girl who couldn't keep a houseplant alive," as she put it, wanted her son, Max, and daughter, Maggie, now 17 and 14, to know where their food came from and had an idea that she could grow produce and donate it to the local food bank.

They hired a farmer, who lived on the property and planted four hectares of nutritionally rich crops like kale, collard greens, carrots and peppers. The food bank provided volunteers to harvest it. Before long, the Farm was producing a reliable yearly crop that the food bank distributed. Brian Dormer, who works for United Airlines, is gone four to five days out of seven; he pitched in when he could. The children came when their school schedules allowed.

Esther Dormer, who was attending every sustainable-agriculture conference she could sign up for, met Frey at one, and enlisted his help in applying permaculture principles, which are all about creating efficient and self-sustaining ecological systems like no-till orchards. She bought an old Amish barn so the volunteers would have a place to get out of the sun. And she fantasized about "a joyful coming together," she said, of eager, like-minded helpers.

She kept animals, too: pot-bellied pigs that were keen diggers and escape artists, along with goats, chickens, llamas, horses and a donkey.

"It was like a really great petting zoo," she said.

After seven years, Dormer was worn out by the farming, and her children had grown into teenagers, more interested in paintball than in animals and crops. She gave the llamas, the pigs, the goats, the horses and the donkey to several nearby farms. The chickens had been wiped out in two weeks when a family of hawks moved in. Dormer decided she was ready to enjoy the place, to turn the working farm into a weekend getaway.

At first, she consulted landscape architects.

"But they were all about where to put the tree," she said.

Meanwhile, Dagnal, who was raising three boys, and had always decorated her own home and her friends' homes, decided to have an open house to show off her work: lacquered tables, refinished case goods and pale upholstered pieces. Dormer was invited by a friend of a friend and was attracted to Dagnal's style, which reminded her of her own.

An early project involved a pond, its bank and an old rowboat.

"Esther said, 'Make this look fabulous,'" Dagnal recalled. "I cleaned the boat all up, painted it black and cream. I had never done anything like that before. My friends would say, 'You're painting a boat?'"

Now it rests prettily half in, half out of the water, tethered to an iron post, no longer a boat so much as a decorative object.

"We made it fashionable," Dagnal said.

She also turned a huge concrete fountain base into a coffee table/terrarium for the living room of the farmhouse, filling it with dirt, moss, twigs and rocks, and topping it with a piece of acrylic. Frey had to reinforce the floor so it would not cave in. (The rule for which pieces of furniture and objects make it onto the Farm, Dagnal explained: "It has to make you bite your knuckle, and it can't be dinky.")

A laundry room is now a luxurious bath lounge, with iron garden chairs upholstered in an old mink coat Dagnal found at a thrift shop.

Purists might wince, but Dagnal and Dormer are having fun gussying up wheelbarrows, milking stations and dusty sheds. One outbuilding now shines with white paint, gilded mirrors and an artist's easel. It is a space inspired by Dagnal's 10-year-old son, Will, who liked to play there while his mother was working.

"It's never, 'Let's make this cream-coloured,'" Dormer said. "It's more that we find something, Lisa covers it in moss and I love it. It just evolves."

The merging of the decorative with the utilitarian occasionally poses problems. In a toolshed, Dagnal created an installation of salvaged wood, coils of rope and chains. Its components are tempting to Frey and the Farm's workers, who sometimes sneak away with the parts.

"They have stripped that down to nothing many times," Dagnal said. "When anyone needs anything, that's the first place they go."

-End-