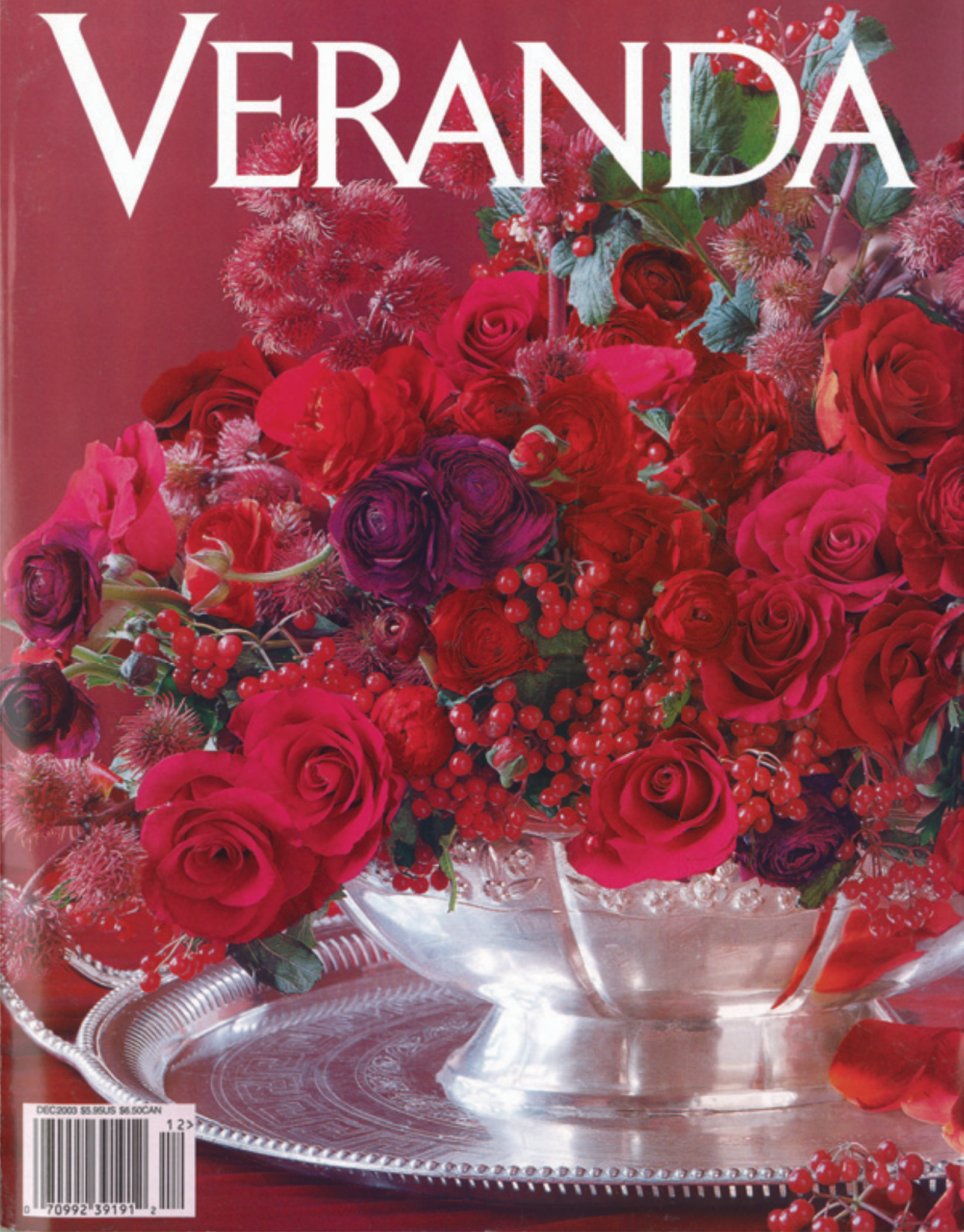


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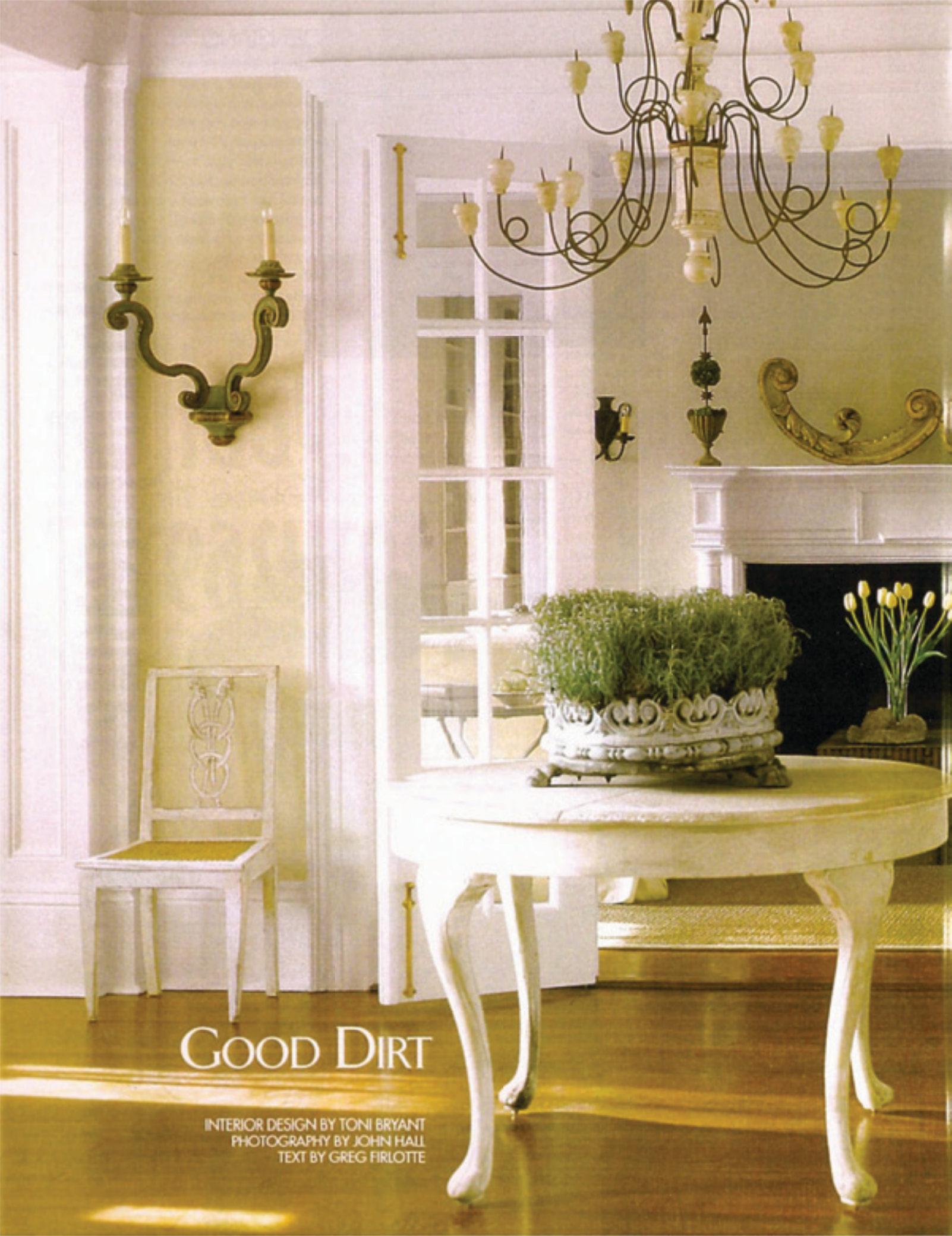


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GOOD DIRT

INTERIOR DESIGN BY TONI BRYANT
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN HALL
TEXT BY GREG FIRLOTTE



AT LAST

It seems that I always have dirt under my fingernails," says Toni Bryant with a smile. Long before she began her career as an interior designer in the mid-1980s, Bryant had a love affair with gardening. While other children were creating sand castles and mud pies, a five-year-old Bryant asked her parents to remove her sandbox so that she could plant a garden in its place. An interest that began in childhood would eventually come into play when the designer purchased a 1908 home in southwestern Connecticut.

"For ten years, I would pass by this house on a daily walk with my dog, never once thinking that someday I would live in it," Bryant recalls. Of all the houses in the neighborhood, she was particularly drawn to this one. Unlike others around it, the house had a somewhat unkempt yard, with bushes overgrown and too many trees hiding the great bones of the McKim, Mead & White-style architecture. To Bryant, it was a sleeping beauty. When the house came up for sale, she jumped at the opportunity to own it.

With the assistance of architect Laura Kachler and landscape architect Janice Parker, Bryant slowly awakened the sleeping beauty over four painstaking years. The entry hall with its clean lines and abundant use of molding would serve as the standard for the renovation throughout.

The first task was to remove all traces of the

PRECEDING PAGES: Washed in natural light, the entry hall of Toni Bryant's Connecticut home sets the tone for the decor. Italian sconces and a wood and iron chandelier present lyrical lines. Topiary elements become recurring themes: zinc planters flank French doors while a French tin jardinière crowns a scored-top Swedish table. An 18th-c. Italian side chair is one of a pair. **RIGHT:** The 35-foot-long living room was divided into three different areas. Replacing the traditional painting over the mantel, a large white and gilt carousel fragment is joined by matching tin garden ornaments. Tole table is painted to mimic bamboo. Holly Hunt Collection sofa and Rose Tarlow-Melrose House chairs slipcovered in Rogers & Goffigon linen. Seagrass area rug. Paint on living room and entry hall walls formulated with artist Donald Kaufman's paint "recipes."





modern Euro-style interiors that seemed out of place with the house's architectural heritage. On both floors, rooms were enlarged and an abundance of French doors and windows added, bathing previously darkened interiors with natural light. Walls were painted with soft, natural colors and all molding, trim, doors and built-in shelves echoed the look established in the entry hall. And, important to Bryant, unnecessary trees and bushes were removed and the yard revitalized to showcase the house as she had envisioned it during the decade of strolling past with her dog.

During the years of renovation, Bryant purchased furnishings—particularly garden ornaments, antique French tin tole ware and vintage and antique furniture—wherever she traveled, from local antiques shops to dealers and sources from Atlanta to Santa Fe. She confides, "At the point of purchase, I always knew exactly where each item was going to be placed."

Bryant's love of gardening is evidenced in every room, although she never purposefully set out to create "a house with garden decor." Such intentional design schemes run the risk of becoming clichéd or filled with kitsch. Instead there is the essence of the outdoors brought inside in clean and simple terms. Outdoor ornaments and planters, jardinières, finials, a weathervane, balcony railings, lampposts and so much more find themselves skillfully mingled with new and antique furniture, chandeliers and sconces—one of the oldest pieces being a circa 1840 French cherry wood table in the dining room. "I'm more interested in the shape and texture of a piece than its pedigree," says Bryant, who, with her daughter Morgan, is opening Aspen Inside, a shop in Colorado featuring "fun eclectic home furnishings."

It's been a long journey from Bryant's childhood sandbox-turned-garden to her restored home in Connecticut filled with garden ornaments and accoutrements. She keeps busy during the spring and summer months planting and repotting containers with flowers and topiaries to place throughout the house and around the yard and pool. Dirt does get under the fingernails, and that's just fine with her. □

RIGHT: Vintage and antique items blend for a delightful effect. Sofa table—an antique purchased in Hong Kong—holds a pair of French carved limestone finials. Iron base of the marble-topped demilune table once served as a balcony railing in Paris. Handcarved 1950s mirror. Cast-iron base of floor lamp probably was once a street lamp. Vintage rattan chairs surround a slate-topped iron table sporting lion's paw feet.





