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COLLECTOR'S EDITION: INTERIOR DESIGNERS' OWN HOMES





KARIN BLAKE

AN EAST COAST
FARMHOUSE
IN MONTANA

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"Tucked into the end of a narrow valley and set against a national wilderness" is how Karin Blake describes the setting of Crow Hollow Ranch in Montana. OPPOSITE: The designer in a 1952 Chevy truck. ABOVE: "I wanted a combination barn/farmhouse. The peak roof was added for a western feel."

When I was growing up," says Karin Blake, "I was taught to pick every dandelion I saw. And now look at this!" She is pointing to a field full of dandelions that begins at the fence line at her Crow Hollow Ranch and climbs up into the timber beneath the peaks of the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness in southwestern Montana, just outside Livingston. If Blake were indeed to pick

every dandelion, she would eventually work her way up from the guesthouse to the main house, which sits in a bend of Suce Creek.

On a hot summer day, Molly, a seven-year-old Doberman, Menashe, a young pointer, and Livingston, a broken-tailed black-and-white cat, are lying on the porch. Their air of lassitude is fitting, for Karin Blake, a Los Angeles-based designer, and her husband, William Levine, have built a remark-

ably relaxing place. "This is the first house I've ever actually built from scratch," says Blake. "Since I come from the East Coast, what I really wanted was a farmhouse."

What Blake has done is to revise the idea of a farmhouse, in this case one whose first principle is the porch. "I changed what in my opinion would be an East Coast farmhouse into a West Coast farmhouse with just a few little touches—I did everything on a larger scale." The deep



"I liked the idea of one huge room that functions for many purposes," says Blake of the great room, which runs the length of the first floor. "I followed my instincts about what pieces belonged here—I wanted to convey the spirit of the old West."



TOP RIGHT: "The crows seemed appropriate, as this was the site of the Crow Indian reservation," says Blake. Adirondack andirons, Richard Mulligan Antiques. ABOVE RIGHT: The living area has painted sleds, saddles and Navajo blankets.



porch has grown to heroic proportions and is now a place for dining and entertaining in summer. Inside a conventional farmhouse, it's all too common to find a warren of dark, small rooms. Not here. From the porch into the great room and from the great room into the kitchen, there is an expansive sense of flow, an ease of transition, that is rarely found in traditional farmhouses.

The effect of Blake's design is to create a weathered informality, even though the house is only three years old. An enormous fireplace in the great room was built from Idaho granite. "I grew up in Bucks County, Pennsylvania," says Blake, "and so this is a bit of a carryover. I've always wanted a huge fireplace." The great room is framed with beams brought from New Hampshire, and

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OPPOSITE: A late-19th-century log-cabin quilt and circa 1920 hickory chairs woven at the Indiana state prison are in the dining area. "I found the chairs on the East Coast, but I'm two short," says Blake. On the table is an 1850s trencher.

ABOVE: The kitchen's red pantry doors by the Wolf stove were saved from Dinah Shore and George Montgomery's California farm. Wood salvaged from buildings on the property was used for the countertops and cabinet drawers.

the house has floors of wide New England boards that have already endured many generations of foot traffic. Several of the interior doors were taken from what Blake calls "a California version of an East Coast farmhouse" built in Encino by George Montgomery, the actor who was married to Dinah Shore and was well known as a furniture maker. Set within plastered walls, the doors appear to be framed, their hues echoed by the flooring and by the varied objects of folk

art that Blake has gathered around her.

What makes the farmhouse still more striking is how it steadfastly resists the clichés of modern western design. There are no horse-collar mirrors, no antler chandeliers. There are no varnished log walls or cow-hide sofas. Instead, there is a strong sense of the interconnections between one place and another in Karin Blake's life. "I had an old farmhouse on Martha's Vineyard that was my love," she says, and

she has somehow yoked those places together in a way that is not an imposition on Montana.

Blake made this happen, in part, by her careful choice of site. "One of the things about the house that I love is having this creek, or 'crick,' as they say here. I think, too, because of New England, this was familiar to me." Suce Creek curves around a corner of the house, only a few feet away from the porch. The pines that grow along its bank seem to enfold the





OPPOSITE: A circa 1885 wood horse and a 1920 fish decoy, both from Richard Mulligan Antiques, rest on a table in the upstairs study, which leads into the master bedroom. “I think dark woods and old leather work well here,” Blake says. Bed linens are from Ralph Lauren.

ABOVE: “I love the site,” says Blake. “A creek wraps around the house. There are a lot of trees, which is unusual for Montana—it’s more like New England. And there are great wilderness trails for riding.” Adirondack chairs line the deep porch, where Blake and her husband entertain in summer.

house, and so does the enveloping sound of the water. “The guest bedroom is the best room in the house,” Blake says, “because from every window you hear the creek at night.”

The site was not without its problems, though. During excavation the contractor, Jim Handl, found a spring where the foundation was meant to go. But Blake insisted on her creekside location. There are now French drains beneath the house that escort the spring’s outflow into the creek. The ability to over-

come obstacles like that—as well as Handl’s superb execution of Blake’s intentions—is one of the reasons Blake is so full of praise for her contractor, with whom she conferred by phone from Los Angeles in between flying in every weekend, using her husband as interpreter.

In a sense, Blake’s house and its site help control the openness of the Montana landscape. The temptation, for some, might have been to build a plush, overstuffed house that wards off the outdoors. But that was not

Karin Blake’s temptation. Her sense of design is based on the virtues found in the folk art she collects: simplicity, plainness and modesty of purpose without any sacrifice of aesthetic sophistication. There are bare walls and bare floors, yet, Blake says, “this is cluttered for me.” Instead of a house whose fullness banishes the outdoors, there is room for the outdoors to enter, especially in summer, when the doors to the porch are open and Menashe, Molly and Livingston come and go at will. □