



New ways to
think about the space over the fireplace

Mantelscapes

BY KARIN LIDBECK-BRENT



Calm and collected

When displaying a collection, keep your arrangement simple and clean. Don't add lots of accents or you'll create a distraction. Here, sturdy, decorative vintage ironware marches across the mantel. A few flowers in a single pitcher add interest to this classic grouping in white.

In many homes, a fireplace mantel is the most conspicuous feature of the most frequently used room, and the first thing people see when they walk in. But I think all too often it's a missed opportunity.

I've seen a lot of bland mantels in my day—mantels that are frozen in time, decorated once (soon after moving in) and never changed. In general, I think people have a tendency to be too timid and traditional when it comes to creating a still life on the mantel. They do the expected, like flanking a family portrait with a pair of candlesticks, and call it a day. Or they create a jumble of too many things and never give it another thought.

It's too bad, because decorating a mantel is a great way to express yourself, to set the tone for a room, and to freshen things up. I recommend changing your mantel-scape with the seasons.



In the spirit of the season

At holiday time, think lights and greenery—with a twist. Get away from the traditional draped-garland look and fill terra-cotta pots with branches instead. A few pine cones, garden accents, and well-placed candles complete the woodland look. Use the entire width of the mantel. If things look crowded, subtract or shift the order of objects to create a pleasing design. Then stand back and take a look at the overall arrangement.





Balance and harmony are everything

I like symmetry—I almost always center paintings or prints in the space over the mantel—but even if you prefer asymmetrical arrangements, balance is critical to a well-styled mantel. Vary heights and weights, countering tall objects with shorter ones, narrow with wide, heavy with less substantial pieces. When decorating with similar objects, I think it's best to point them in the same direction, keeping angles and tangents the same.

What looks good on a mantel has a lot to do with the mantel itself—its style, depth and width, and how prominent it is. But remember to look beyond the mantel shelf when planning your composition. Consider ceiling height (lots of low things will be lost in a vaulted room); fireplace materials (brass or glass can be beautiful against rustic stone); and the overall style of the room (country collectibles may not be the best mantel choices for a sleek, contemporary room).

Unity is another principle of good design that can make or break a

mantel arrangement. It's important that objects relate to one another in some way; the connecting thread may be color (red vintage toys), materials (terra-cotta pots of all shapes and sizes), or theme (objects found in nature).

The one exception to this rule is what I call "the surprise." I believe that bringing an unexpected object, like a polished brass candlestick amid rustic pots filled with holiday greens, is a good way to jazz things up. **[H]**

Karin Lidbeck-Brent is a photo stylist who decorates mantels of all kinds for designers, photographers, and friends in Connecticut, where she lives.

Consider a common thread

A mantel is the perfect spot to showcase a few of your favorite objects, as long as there's an underlying theme to them. In this case, it's country. The trick here is to pair unexpected objects (checkerboards and watering cans, for example), especially those with contrasting shapes and textures. Remember that cool metals look great next to warm woods.



Nature study

Found objects can inspire a simple and inexpensive mantelscape. Use shells, rocks, driftwood—anything interesting and organic. Start with a focal point that has a distinctive shape, like a beautiful branch or a cluster of small birch logs. Then fill in the empty spaces with smaller finds, including candles in earthy colors.



By the book

Create an intriguing arrangement by using beautiful books as “building blocks.” Group them according to size and color (or subject), lay them down or stand them up all across the mantel until you’re pleased with the way they look together. Next, add photos, complementary prints, boxes—whatever lends interest and gives the arrangement a rich, layered, and abundant feel.