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# Happily Ever After

Virginia family designs a fairy tale cottage

Jim and Debbie Sylvester put an unusual challenge to their architect: They asked him to design the smallest house possible that would still fit their needs for comfort and entertaining in a second home.

The architect, Glenn Fong, who has designed houses measuring up to 10,000 square feet, couldn't wait to get started. "It was a crazy but wonderful idea, to be able to create something that really demonstrated that smaller is better," Glenn says. "It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to create a cottage in the woods whose origins came from a storybook."

## **The Story Begins**

To add a timeless look and feel to their home, Jim and Debbie Sylvester chose timber framing. The house would perch on 20 acres in Virginia's Shenandoah River valley. The heavily wooded site is crossed by a flowing spring-fed stream and features an abundance of flora and fauna—from wild orchids to black bear. The property is abutted on the east by 155 acres owned by a family-oriented, national conservation group. To the south lies Shenandoah National Park, which has become the Sylvesters' extended backyard with an unspoiled view of the mountains and access to the Appalachian Trail. Across the state road from the property sits a large farm where grazing cattle are fenced by centuries-old stonewalls.



With shelving for more than 1,000 volumes, the bookcase was fitted to both the straight and curved walls of the great room. Clear, heartwood cherry was used for all of the floors, paneling and woodwork. Debbie paired chairs with a full-sized sleeper sofa for comfortable seating.

The Sylvesters researched several timber frame companies and chose Blue Ridge Timberwrights. Their initial introduction to the company was via a picture on the back of a magazine showing one of Blue Ridge Timberwrights' timber frame bridges.

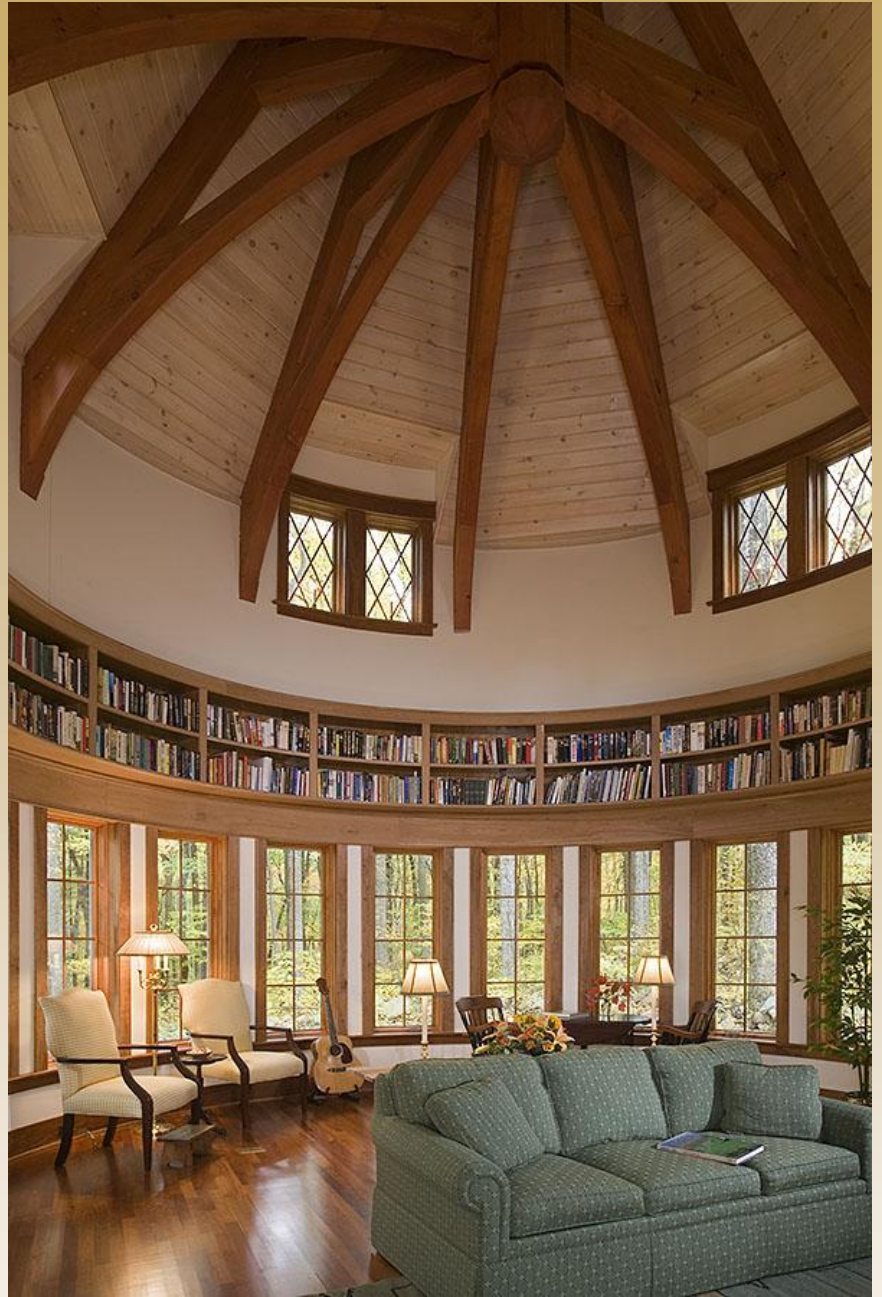
"Blue Ridge Timberwrights is a Virginia company that offers high quality at an affordable price," Jim says. "They were also very willing to work with our architect and builder."

Rick McCurdy of Blue Ridge Timberwrights adds, "The homeowners opted for our kiln-dried Douglas fir timbers, as they wanted a very refined interior with minimal gaps and checking." The timbers were stained cherry to fit with their plans for cabinetry. White oak trusses and brackets were used for the outside of the circular portion of the home.

To complete their team, Jim and Debbie selected the highly respected Stepp Construction of Front Royal, Virginia, as their builder. They found Bob and Bobby Stepp's can-do attitude to be complemented by superior skill needed for this project. The Stepps also were willing to consider their requests for various novel designs and features.



This sunny area in the great room doubles for either intimate family dining, or, with additional leaves in the mahogany table, as seating for eight. Two of the couple's eight "university chairs" sit in front of Pella windows.



The great room's ceiling truss was inspired by an ancient church roof design-and has become a focal point in the room. A "boss pin" secures the cherry-stained Douglas fir roof trusses.

Joe Hilliard constructed the dry-stack fireplace using the same stone as the exterior, which is a mixture of hard Pennsylvania field-stone, Silver Creek New England quartzite and local granite. The king post truss with curved lower chord draws the eye up to the pine ceilings.



For Debbie and Jim, the pub room is their evening dining room with two wing back chairs and a tilt-top table for eating. Kathy Fliger painted the mural of the native wildflowers and critters above the window seat.

## Right at Home

Jim and Debbie were influenced by the work of Christopher Alexander, author of *A Pattern Language*. The book helped guide their thoughts about what this cottage should be—a timeless vacation retreat not tied to any specific era of design. The completed cottage has two rooms on the 1,030-square-foot main level and two more on the 660-square-foot second level. When you enter the front door, you are in the great room, with a view to the woods in three directions and the imposing stonework of the fireplace. To the right of the front door is the pub room and stairs to the second level. At the top of the stairs are the master bedroom on the left and the great closet on the right, which serves as a private guest bedroom suite.

"Glenn christened the kitchen and gathering area as the Pub Room," Debbie recalls. The name fits. The room often serves the same purpose as a pub: a meeting place for friends, dining, debating, game playing or anything that one might imagine happening in a pub. The Sylvesters carried the theme into the decor, adding horse brasses, copper measuring jugs and double wall sconces for an Old World feel. The granite countertop is perfect for setting out appetizers and buffets.

For now, the garage serves its intended function. In the future, the space can be converted to a first floor bedroom when the owners choose not to climb the stairs.

"Having two rooms on the main floor works great for both entertaining and for quiet times with just the family," Debbie says. "Every room, every space and every chair is used daily." Except for the great sofa, all of the furniture was chosen to be light enough to be moved, rearranged and re-purposed on demand.



### Attention to Details

Bobby built the cottage with hybrid construction, using conventional stud framing for some exterior walls. Those walls were covered inside with a smooth finished drywall. Where timber framing is used, it is both integral to the home's structural integrity and beautiful appearance.

Blue Ridge Timberwrights designed the "gunstock" mantel posts and massive mantel to accent the fireplace. Custom cherry cabinets are topped with granite. Debbie, who loves to bake bread and pastries, ordered a lowered marble pastry shelf.

Debbie and Jim were very involved in all phases of construction. They reviewed every plan and every drawing, in addition to completing designs for closet shelving, kitchen cabinets and built-in cabinets, which they contracted themselves. They also did most of the painting and all of the wood treatment.

"Lighting is of special interest to us," Jim says. "Debbie and I spent many hours designing the overall plan for both the interior and exterior." The overall plan for both the interior and exterior." The couple planned for cross-illumination for tables and work surfaces to avoid shadows. Ambient light in the cottage comes from decorative fixtures, with occasional spot fixtures providing accent lighting.

"The switches and dimmers had to make it easy to achieve a number of scenes, for entertaining, private dining or candlelit dinner," Jim explains.

Even before the architect's drawings were accepted, the couple determined the furniture layout to ensure versatility while managing traffic flows. Once the cottage was complete, Debbie took charge of the interior decorating with an intent to keep the cottage simple and uncluttered. Most of the furnishings and artwork were purchased specifically for this cottage. She sought to include furnishings with special meaning, such as the "university chairs" with the school crest to honor each family member's masters or other advanced degree.

### Beauty Built In

Because they wanted special touches in the home, the Sylvesters hired Roger Stephens of Front Royal, Virginia, who took Jim's designs for built-in furniture and created the look and function the couple desired. Roger built the wraparound bookcase in the great room, a desk, liquor cabinet, additional bookcases, window seats, wainscoting, custom closet shelving, a pantry and several doors.

The cottage has a two-zone system with propane heating for the main level and a heat pump for the second level in case the home's four fireplaces don't provide sufficient warmth. A two-sided wood-burning fireplace serves both the great room and the pub room. The master bedroom's is also wood-burning but with a gas option, while the fireplace in the master bathroom functions as a space heater using propane. The fourth fireplace in the attic guest bedroom is electric. The cottage also features central air conditioning.

Reading is the Sylvesters' major evening pastime, along with games and listening to music- they decided not to bring a television to the cottage. There is, however, a state-of-the-art digital jukebox and sound system, operated by remote control. "Music is an important part of our lives and having instant access to any CD or song in our collection is easy with this technology," Jim says.



The master bath is a great place to soak and enjoy a good book, thanks to an overhead reading light for the tub. Because this is a vacation home, the Sylvesters installed an air-jetted tub that automatically purges water from the jets and eliminates mold or frozen pipes when the home is not in use.



The master bedroom and bath enjoy early morning views of the woods and nature. Window coverings would only obstruct the view of the surrounding woods. Debbie's grand-mother hand-stitched the double wedding ring quilt that covers the sleigh bed.



The natural stone base, light yellow stucco walls and red cedar shutters combine to form the storybook fairy tale cottage look for Jim and Debbie Sylvester's home in Virginia. White oak trusses support the left-side half roof that sheds rainwater away from the house and foundation and eliminates the need for gutters.

"Our cottage is a part-year residence. We use it on weekends and for extended stays throughout the year-when our children haven't reserved it," Debbie says. "It is the perfect retreat from a demanding work week." The Sylvesters enjoy the change of seasons and the outdoor activities the area offers. And, the cottage is a snug haven when the weather outside is less than ideal.

"It is a great place to draw our family together," Debbie says. "For me, it is my fairy tale cottage come to life."